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COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF A MILITARY STRATEGIC TRADITION

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**COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN COLOMBIA: THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF
A MILITARY STRATEGIC TRADITION**

By

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Supervised by

Professor Michael Rainsborough

**A thesis presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in War Studies**

**Department of War Studies
King's College London
May 2016**

ABSTRACT

This research proposes to examine the composition and evolution of the Colombian military's approach to counter-insurgency since the origins of the internal armed conflict that affects the country. Following the lineaments of strategic theory, it will endeavour to understand how the military came to view the utilisation of armed force, amongst other means, since the beginning of the armed conflict. To construct the Colombian military strategic tradition, it will attempt to identify its value-system, that is, the ideological precepts, motivational patterns and assumptions that throughout the years have influenced the military's use of the main instruments at its disposal. It will explore how these diverse factors have shaped different understandings of the character of the conflict, views of its political conduct, and of the role and limits of armed force, amongst other issues. This analysis will allow to establish lines of continuity and change in Colombian military thinking. In this respect, the research argues that the formative years of the Colombian strategic tradition during the 1960s, and in particular the influence of counter-insurgency thinking, has been fundamental in shaping the military's different, and at times conflicting, judgements about the conflict, the nature of their enemies and the limits of armed force during the past 20 years of escalation of violence in Colombia. Overall, the research shows that the inherent tensions visible in Colombian military thinking have undermined the formulation of strategy, that is, the translation of means into political ends.

WORD COUNT: 98,893.

‘Tell me something, old friend: why are you fighting?’

‘What other reason could there be?’ Colonel Gerineldo Marquez answered. ‘For the great Liberal party.’

‘You’re lucky because you know why,’ he answered. ‘As far as I’m concerned, I’ve come to realize only just now that I’m fighting because of pride.’

‘That’s bad,’ Colonel Gerineldo Márquez said.

Colonel Aureliano Buendía was amused at his alarm. ‘Naturally,’ he said. ‘But in any case, it’s better than not knowing why you’re fighting.’ He looked him in the eyes and added with a smile:

‘Or fighting, like you, for something that doesn’t have any meaning for anyone.’

Gabriel Garcia Márquez - One Hundred Years of Solitude.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Professor Michael Rainsborough for his guidance and support in furthering my intellectual development during these four years of the PhD process. I also take the opportunity to thank Professor Douglas Porch for his constant encouragement and for being the original source of inspiration of this research project.

I would also like to thank my parents and my sisters in Colombia, as well as my now extensive family in Greece and France for their unstinting support, confidence and love. Finally, I would like to thank Myrto, whose unconditional love and support were fundamental to bring this project to fruition.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronyms in text

AUC: Autodefensas Unidad de Colombia

COIN: Counter-insurgency

CoS: Chief of Staff

Colar: Colombian Army

Colmil: Colombian Military

DAS: Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad

DoD: Department of Defense

DoS: Department of State

DSP: Democratic Security Policy

ELN: Ejército de Liberación Nacional

EPL: Ejército Popular de Liberación

FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

FUDRA: Rapid Deployment Force – Colombian Army

GOC: Government of Colombia

MAAG: Military Assistance and Advisory Group

MAP: Military Assistance Program

MTT: Mobile Training Team

MILGRP: United States Military Group

MOEC: Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Campesino

MoD: Ministry of Defence

OAS: Organization of American States

SIC: Servicio de Inteligencia Colombiano

Acronyms in footnotes

AGN: Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá

APR: Archivo Presidencia de la Republica, Bogotá

DDRS: Declassified Documents Reference System

DNSA: Digital National Security Archive

FBIS: Foreign Broadcast Information Service

FRUS: Foreign Relations of the United States

HIA: Hoover Institution Archives

NSA GWU: National Security Archive, George Washington University – Washington DC.

NARA: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park - Maryland

NAR Kew: National Archives, Kew Gardens

n.a: No author

n.d: No date

n.p: No page

OSA: Office South American Affairs, Department of State

s.n: Publisher unknown

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9

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Acheson, Dean, United States Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953.

Ayerbe Chaux, General Gerardo, Army CoS from 1965 to 1966; thereafter chief of the Colmil. Minister of Defence from 1968 to 1970.

Barco, Virgilio, Liberal politician; President of Colombia from August 1986 to August 1990. Illegalised the self-defence forces previously used by the Colmil, and negotiated the demobilization of the M-19.

Bayer, Tulio, leader of the MOEC foco in Vichada, captured in 1962.

Bedoya, General Harold, Army CoS from until his dismissal in 1997 by President Samper who accused of insubordination; protégé of General Alvaro Valencia.

Betancur, Belisario, Conservative politician; President from 1982 to 1986. Initiated the first peace process with the FARC and M-19 insurgencies.

Briceño Jorge, nom de guerre: 'Mono Jojoy'; military commander of the FARC's Oriental Bloc oversaw the group's offensive during the 1990s. Killed by the Colmil in September 2010.

Cabot, John M., United States Ambassador to Colombia from 1957 to 1959.

Carson, Reynold E., United States Ambassador to Colombia from 1966 to 1969.

Castellanos, General Reinaldo, Army CoS from 2004 to 2006.

Duarte Blum, General Alberto, Chief of the Armed Forces under the presidency of General Rojas, directed the demobilization and amnesty of the Llanos guerrilla between 1953 and 1955,

Dulles, John Foster, United States Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959.

Franco Isaza, Eduardo, Commander of the Liberal guerrilla group of Los Llanos from 1949 to 1953; thereafter in exile in Venezuela.

Freeman, Fulton, United States Ambassador to Colombia from 1961 to 1964.

Gaitán, Jorge Eliécer, charismatic chief of the Liberal Party murdered on 9 April 1948.

Galvin, General John, adviser to the Colmil in 1954, assisted in the foundation of the Lancero (Ranger) School. Later in his career served as commander of US SOUTHCOM from 1985 to 1987 and thereafter as Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

Geberich, Albert, Officer in Charge of Colombian Affairs, Department of State from 1946 to 1960.

Gomez, Laureano, Conservative Party chief since 1930; President from August 1950 until his fall in June 1953. Signatory of the National Front agreement in 1957.

Guzman Campos, German, Colombian Jesuit Priest and sociologist; member of the official Commission for the Study of Violence in 1958.

Jaramillo, Sergio, Adviser to the Minister of Defence in 2002, later Vice-minister from 2006 to 2009. National Security Advisor from 2010 to 2012; thereafter Peace Commissioner in charge of negotiations with FARC.

Koontz, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph, leader of a CIA Survey Team that visited Colombia in October 1959.

Landazábal Reyes, General Fernando. Korea veteran (Lieutenant); chief advocate of counter-insurgency theory during the 1960s; in charge of psychological warfare plans at Minister of War from 1962 to 1965. Minister of Defense from 1980 until his dismissal in 1982. Vocal critic of peace negotiations with the insurgency since retirement, murdered in 1999.

Larrotta, Antonio, leader of the MOEC insurgent group; killed in 1961.

Lebret, Louis- Joseph, French Catholic priest, founder of the mission Economy and Humanism advocating development initiatives in Latin America during the 1950s.

Lleras Camargo, Alberto, Liberal politician; President in Charge from July 1944 to August 1946; first Secretary General of the Organization of American States from 1948 to 1954. President of Colombia from August 1958 to August 1962. Signatory of the National Front agreement in 1957.

Lleras Restrepo, Carlos, Liberal politician; President from August 1966 to August 1970. First cousin of Alberto Lleras.

López Michelsen, Alfonso, Liberal Politician son of Alfonso López Pumarejo; President of Colombia from August 1974 to August 1978.

López Pumarejo, Alfonso, Liberal politician and social reformer; President from 1934 to 1938, re-elected in 1942 and resigned after a failed military coup d'état on July 1944.

Mann, Thomas C., Director of the Department of State Office of Inter-American Affairs 1949 to 1955; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs 1960-1961.

Marshall, George C., United States Secretary of State from 1947 to 1949.

Marín, Pedro Antonio, nom de guerre: 'Manuel Marulanda Velez,' or 'Tirofijo'; leader of the FARC from 1966 until his death in 2009.

Matallana, General Joaquín, Korea veteran (Lieutenant); early advocate of Special Forces for counter-insurgency operations, led Colar offensive against Marquetalia enclave. Dismissed by President Alfonso Lopez in 1977.

McCaffrey, General Barry, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (United States Drug Czar) from 1996 to 2001,

McNamara, Robert S., United States Secretary of Defence from 1961 to 1968.

Morantes, Luis, nom de guerre: 'Jacobo Arenas'; Communist ideologue, joined the communist self-defence forces in 1963; assisted 'Tirofijo' in the founding of FARC and co-led the group until his death in 1990.

Mora Rangel, General Jorge Enrique; Army CoS from 1999 to 2002, promoted to Chief of the Armed Forces by Uribe in 2002 and led the offensive against FARC until his retirement in 2004. Since 2012 serves as government mediator with FARC.

Montoya, General Mario; Colombian Army CoS from 2006 to 2008.

Navas, General Alejandro, Army CoS from 2010 to 2011; Chief of the Colombian Armed Forces from 2011 to 2013.

Navas Pardo, General Rafael, Colombian Army CoS 1957; leader of the Military Junta that deposed General Rojas Pinilla 1957 to 1958.

Ospina, General Carlos, Army CoS from 2002 to 2004; Chief of the Colombian Armed Forces from 2003 to 2007.

Ospina Perez, Mariano, Conservative politician; President from August 1946 to August 1950.

Pastrana, Andrés, Conservative Politician, President from August 1998 to August 2002. Signed *Plan Colombia* with the US government and began peace-negotiations with FARC.

Pinzon Caicedo, General Guillermo, Korea veteran (Captain); promoted to Army CoS in 1967. Dismissed after a row with President Lleras Restrepo over the defence budget in 1969. Proponent of Plan Andes, a spin-off of Plan Lazo .

Prias Álape, Jacobo, nom de guerre: 'Charronegro'; leader of the communist self-defence forces, predecessor of FARC. Founder of Marquetalia. Killed in 1960 by Liberal rebels.

Puyana García, Brigadier General Gabriel, Korea veteran (Lieutenant); protégé of Ruiz Novoa and promoter of counter-insurgency theory since early 1960s. Accused of insubordination and dismissed by President Alfonso Lopez in 1974.

Ramirez, Augusto, Conservative politician, Interior minister 1960 to 1961; director of the official Commission for the Study of Violence in 1958.

Reveiz Pizarro, General Gabriel, Chief of the Colmil from 1962 to 1965; thereafter Minister of War, later Defence, until 1968.

Rojas Pinilla, General Gustavo, Chief of the Colmil from 1952 until June 1953; military dictator until May 1957.

Román, Major Eduardo, Army commander in Los Llanos from 1949 to 1951; director of the DAS rural security bureau from 1960 to 1964.

Rostow, Walt Whitman, United States Deputy National Security Advisor in 1961; Director of Policy Planning, Department of State from 1961 to 1969.

Ruiz Novoa, General Alberto, Commander of the Colar Batallion in Korea (1951) as Lieutenant Colonel. Army CoS from 1960 until 1962; thereafter Minister of War. Proponent of Plan Lazo. Dismissed by President Guillermo Valencia in 1965.

Rusk, Dean, United States Secretary of State from 1961 to 1969.

Saiz, General Alberto, Civil-Military Chief of Los Llanos in 1953; later Secretary General of the Ministry of War until 1957

Samper, Ernesto, Liberal Politician; President from August 1994 to August 1998.

Santos, Juan Manuel, wealthy scion of *El Tiempo* publishing company. President Uribe's Minister of Defence from 2006 to 2009; thereafter President of Colombia.

Sierra, Colonel Gustavo, commander of the Colombian Army in Los Llanos 1952 to 1953; military governor of Caldas 1953 to 1956.

Tapias Stahelin, General Fernando, Colmil chief from 1999 to 2002, oversaw the implementation of Plan Colombia and the modernisation of the armed forces.

Turbay, Julio Cesar, Liberal politician; President from 1978 to 1982. Put in place the National Security Statute to combat escalating insurgent violence.

Urdaneta, Rafael, Minister of War from 1950 to 1952, after President in charge until June 1953.

Uribe, Álvaro, Liberal politician and cattle rancher, ran for the Presidency as an independent in 2002. President during two consecutive terms from August 2002 to August 2010. Leader of the opposition to President Juan Manuel Santos in Congress since August 2014.

Valencia, Guillermo, Conservative politician; President from 1962 to 1966.

Valencia Tovar, General Alvaro, Korea veteran (Captain); protégé of Ruiz Novoa and chief Colmil advocate of counter-insurgency theory. Commander of operations against MOEC 1961; planner at Minister of War from 1963 to 1965; thereafter Commander Vth Brigade in charge of operations against ELN. Army CoS from 1973 until his dismissal in 1974.

Yarborough, Lieutenant General William P., commander of the US Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina from 1961 to 1965. Led a Survey Team that visited Colombia in 1962.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2002, the Colombian government ordered the Colombian military (Colmil) to initiate the reoccupation of a 42,000 km² demilitarised zone, in which failed peace negotiations with the insurgents of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) – FARC – had been taking place for almost four years. Since then, the South American country has seen the longest period of sustained military activity against one of the many insurgencies that have contested the established political order since the early 1950s. The still on-going campaign against the FARC, as well as the implementation of a robust counter-narcotics policy and, above all the involvement of the United States, has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners around the world. Since the re-emergence of counter-insurgency (COIN) as a topic of academic interest, and the quest for diverse experiences to inform its implementation by the West in far-flung places like Afghanistan, the Colombian case has been brought in the spotlight as a success story. Take for instance the answer to the question: how would victory in Afghanistan would look like? As stated by the Chair of Military History at Ohio State University, retired US Army Colonel Peter Mansoor who served as General David Petraeus' executive officer during the Iraq War:

At this point the best the United States can hope for is to support an Afghan government that can keep the country together after 2014 and convince the Taliban that it cannot win the war in any conceivable time frame. In my view, this will require the election of an Afghan president with some real leadership abilities, unlike Hamid Karzai. With good leadership and support from the United States and our NATO allies, anything is possible. For a view of what winning might look like, look at Colombia. A decade ago the country seemed on the verge of disaster with the FARC on the ascendancy, but now the war there is all but over. Good Colombian presidential leadership and U.S. support were the keys to victory.¹

¹ Quoted in: Paul Szoldra, 'The Most-Fascinating Insights From The Man Closest To General Petraeus During The Iraq 'Surge'', *Business Insider*, 3 January 2014. Available at: < <http://www.businessinsider.com/peter-mansoor-reddit-ama-2014-1#ixzz3HREoiChh>>. (Accessed 13 March 2014).

In this respect, Colombia is currently being cited as a model for what has begun to be termed ‘small-footprint’ COIN – that is, the dispatch of advisors and cash to bolster the efforts of indigenous forces – which is seen as a promising alternative, in that it remedies two of the major shortcomings of expeditionary COIN as it was applied in Iraq and Afghanistan: the lack of cultural knowledge on the part of the invader, and opposition from their home population with little appetite for large expenditures and significant casualties in remote battle fields.²

Whilst Mansoor rightly points out the importance of good local political leadership and the assistance of allies in war in accounting for the alleged success in Colombia, it is crucial to underline that the combination of these two elements was peculiar to the country’s political context. In other words, key contingent factors make Colombia a poor case model of ‘Small footprint’ intervention to inform Western policy options elsewhere. However, attention given to the current Colmil experience as a model of small footprint assistance appears to leave out the evolution of thought throughout more than half a century of involvement in a protracted internal conflict. As this study will show, the overemphasis on the study of the Colmil’s latest operational and technical progress – developed in great part via US assistance – represents in full measure counter-insurgency’s ‘technocratic conceit’ as a compendium of tactics and best practices transferable across time and culture to deal with any insurgency.³ Such an approach has minimised among other factors, the analysis of the politics that shape strategic thought, that is, paraphrasing John Stone, how an actor’s judgments and views on how the employment of varied techniques – the means of war – are to be translated into political effects.⁴ In other words, tactical proficiency and innovative military techniques count for naught if there is no correct

² See for instance: Paul Schute, “‘What do we do if we are never Going to do this Again?’” Western Counterinsurgency Choices after Iraq and Afghanistan’, In Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M.L.R. Smith (eds), *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp.343-44.

³ Colin Jackson, ‘Government in a Box? Counterinsurgency, State Building, and the Technocratic Conceit,’ In Gventer et. al., *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, p.82.

⁴ John Stone, *Military Strategy. The politics and technique of war* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.4.

understanding of the uniqueness of the context, and where the politics and underlying values that influence the actor's definition of ends and selections of means are relegated to matters of secondary importance.

The general purpose of this thesis will be, in this sense, to put the Colombian military experience in historical perspective, by analysing the composition and evolution of its thinking, placing particular emphasis on the origins of the Colombian conflict from the late 1940s to the end of the 1960s. It is premised on the notion that the latest experience of the Colombian military cannot be explained without referring to a wider historical and political context, which has had a bearing on the military's judgements about the employment of various means to confront the diverse number of armed groups that have challenged the authority of the state. In this sense, any well-founded assessment of the experience of the Colombian military experience of the last decade needs to examine fundamental issues about their behaviour, selection of aims, objectives and methods which requires acknowledging more than six decades of experience engaged in Colombia's conflict. This implies that the small footprint assistance of the US in the last decade has occurred alongside the big footprint of the 'host nation', functioning within the Colmil's strategic outlook, which has a long history. The experiences of state-building since the 1930s, early involvement in *La Violencia*, the origins of a longstanding relationship with the US since the Korean War and the early embracing of counter-insurgency theory in the 1960s, are just a few landmarks in a long chronology of events that have shaped the Colombian military mind.

To yield insight into the subject in hand, this research will engage with various questions, such as: What are the factors that have influenced the military's thinking throughout the years? What are the characteristic elements of the strategic tradition of the Colombian military? Are there any tensions between their understanding of the utility of force and the political conduct of the conflict? And in this sense, do they have an idea of the limits of armed forces in the

conflict? To address these and other questions, the study will follow the lineaments of strategic theory to derive several hypotheses about the development of Colombian military thinking. In essence, it will analyse how different influences (understood, for example, as values, ideologies or political calculations) have, throughout time, been translated into different strategic options for the utilisation of diverse means at the military's disposal.

Strategic Theory: A conceptual framework for the study of the Colombian Military mind

Strategic theory is a method of analysis through which the study of strategy is formalised. Following Michael Howard, its subject matter involves the analysis of the 'use of available resources to gain any objective,' in which the notion of resources implies amongst others the utilisation of military force as an instrument for the attainment of political objectives.⁵ Proponents of the theory have suggested it does not aspire to be a rigid, scientific, all-embracing model of analysis because it recognises that each socio-political context is diverse and contingent. Nonetheless, it permits the study of each context under its unique characteristics through a general rationale which delineates a set of rules of understanding, or purposive assumptions, about expected forms in which political actors will relate means to ends.⁶ Fundamentally, it is accepted that the assumptions it proposes about the expected use of force are what structure it as a theory and formalise it as a method of analysis applicable to any case study. But, what are the basic assumptions of strategic theory and precisely how can they help address the Colombian military?

Up to the end of the Second World War the definition of strategy remained more or less unchanged, still conserving its relation to the ancient Greek term 'strategos', or the art of the

⁵ Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (London: Counterpoint, 1984), p.36.

⁶ M.L.R. Smith and John Stone, 'Explaining Strategic Theory', *Infinity Journal* Issue 4 (2011), p. 27.; see also: M.L.R. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 4.

General, with a direct link between the use of military resources in war.⁷ This notion of strategy also permeated the definition offered by the Prussian philosopher Carl von Clausewitz who presented it as the ‘use of battles to achieve the aim of war.’⁸ The eventual recognition of the rigidity of such a definition began to open the door for its formalisation through strategic theory during the late 1940s. Basil Liddell Hart, for example, considered that Clausewitz’s definition narrowed its meaning as it circumscribed it to the study of battles as the only means to achieve strategic ends⁹ and hence proposed a broader description which is to date one of the most satisfactory: ‘the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy.’¹⁰ Liddell Hart’s definition of strategy broadened the spectrum for its study as an instrument of policy.

Indeed, the recognition of military force as a functional aspect of power is the central assumption of strategic theory.¹¹ The theory’s proponents agree that this conception was already inherent in Clausewitz work, who neatly described war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’.¹² Through this overly quoted and constantly misunderstood phrase, the Prussian thinker underpinned the argument that war always stems from politics, and that this element will be the supreme consideration for its conduct, shaping the ends to be achieved as well as the means and level of effort required for it. War, Clausewitz concluded, should never be thought of as an isolated act, but always as an instrument of policy, capable of being

⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd Edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. XVIII.; See also: Smith and Stone, ‘Explaining Strategic Theory’, p.29.

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Everyman’s Library, 2003), p.87.

⁹ John Garnett, ‘Introduction,’ in John Garnett, *Theories of Peace and Security. A Reader in Contemporary Strategic Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1970), p.14.

¹⁰ Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber, 1967), p.335.

¹¹ Smith, *Fighting for Ireland?*, pp. 3-4. Smith asserts that the assumption of the instrumentality of war is underpinned by the notion of power politics as used by the realist school of International Relations – International historian E.H Carr probably coined the term when he pointed out that ‘politics are[...] in one sense always power politics,’ See his *Twenty Years Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1938) p.102. Realists see political actors competing in the international system to enhance their power and defend their own interests, scenario in which the use of violence is an eventuality when there is a clash of interests amongst the actors. Hence, military power is to be considered as one of the instruments of political power.

¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p.99.

circumscribed, moderated and even modified by altering the goals pursued and the means used to achieve them, a notion of great importance for the analysis of protracted conflicts where the dynamics of the use of violence tend to vary greatly in time:

War moves on its own goal with varying speed, but it always lasts long enough for influence to be exerted on the goal and for its own course to be changed one way or another – long enough, in other words, to remain subject to the action of a superior intelligence.¹³

Clausewitz's synthesis was the product of his effort to understand war as an absolute phenomenon in contrast to its real form. If war is understood as 'an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will', then in absolute terms it would be an instantaneous discharge of force to render the enemy powerless. In the abstract then, the use of force would have no limitations, as opponents would be driven to an extreme in the effort to render the other side defenceless first. However, war, explains Clausewitz, is brought down to reality from the absolute by a series of material and intangible factors; geographic conditions, available resources, the nature of the motivations, the type of objectives sought, and so forth. Therefore, real war is not about the application of brute military force to simply destroy an adversary, but rather an exercise in which violence can be used instrumentally, to coerce rather than annihilate, for the achievement of political goals.

The Prussian philosopher's insights on the instrumentality of war help to introduce several concepts that are at the core of strategic theory. During the early 1950s, a group of 'formal strategists' devoted themselves to the construction of theory, going back to Clausewitzian first principles and promoting new precepts for the utilisation and threat of use of force under the challenges posed by the advent of thermonuclear weapons, which appeared to change the character of war.¹⁴ According to Thomas Schelling, one of the main exponents of this school of thought, 'military strategy could no longer be the science of military victory.

¹³ Ibid., p.xx.

¹⁴ Freedman, *Nuclear Strategy*, p.171.

Rather it would be the art of coercion, intimidation and deterrence.’¹⁵ For Schelling, conflicts can, in turn, be viewed as bargaining situations where the ‘ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependant to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make.’¹⁶ Military force accordingly, can be considered as the power through which a bargain can be struck, or in other words, not strictly employed as brute force to overcome the opponent and destroy him, but rather as a power to hurt, through threats and coercion as to affect the opponents interests and intentions.¹⁷ The notion of bargaining in war helps to appreciate better the functioning of strategic theory as a method of analysis - in Schelling’s words, ‘[t]he art of looking at the problem from the other’s point of view, identifying his opportunities and his interests.’¹⁸ Specifically, it highlights the concepts of interdependency and rational behaviour.

The idea that conflict is interdependent, that is, it involves interaction between at least two opponents, where the actions of one will elicit a response from the other, was already present in Clausewitz who noted that in war the opponent is never an abstract person, but someone who makes choices and takes decision, and thus, one’s own course of action will depend on what we consider the actions of the other will be. In this sense, following John Stone, it is the requirement of taking the response of a reasoning adversary into account that makes the process of strategic formulation a difficult one, specifically with regard to the selection of objectives that can be attainable through force.¹⁹ The concept of rational behaviour, for its part, is associated with the idea that actors calculate the advantages of a particular course of action according to a consistent value system.²⁰ Strategic theory does not consider actors to be

¹⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969), p.7.

¹⁶ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1980) p.5.

¹⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp.4-7.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Schelling, *Choice and Consequence* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980), p.200.

¹⁹ Stone, *Military Strategy*, pp.5-8.

²⁰ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, p.17.

perfectly rational and fully efficient in maximising benefits, rather it supposes their rationality to be bounded and simply denoting, in the words of Uruguayan economist Francisco López-Alves, that ‘actors decisions are made after careful cost-benefit calculation, and the means chosen seem optimal to accomplish the desired end.’²¹ Consistency, then, is a key term when talking about rational behaviour in strategy. For one part, that the measure of the anticipated costs of using force is consistent to the anticipated benefits, on the other, that the motivations and values which structure the ends be consistent with the means selected to achieve them.²²

Furthermore, the assumption of rationality does not imply a value judgement. As the proponents of strategic theory emphasise, analysts are not concerned with the moral validity of the motivations, means and ends of an actor but rather on evaluating how well the choices and decisions taken are applied for the consecution of their stated goals.²³ Analysis using strategic theory endeavours, following Schelling is ‘to be neutral, even cold-blooded towards the parties in a situation,’ by firstly, focusing on the situations rather than on the individuals, and secondly on the tactics that can be employed.²⁴

In summary, strategic theory is a method of approaching that possesses considerable utility for studying the complex reality of the Colombian conflict. It is, in essence, a conceptual framework, rather than a rigid or all-embracing model of analysis, which allows the comprehension of the content of an actor’s value system and to appreciate how this influences the formulation of strategy. It also allows the critical evaluation to proceed in a systematic fashion in the way it proposes to use available means for the achievement of the set goals. With this in mind, this research will endeavour to study the evolution of Colombian military thinking within its unique historical context. It will do so through an evolutionary perspective, as the

²¹ Francisco López-Alvez, ‘Political crises, strategic choices, and terrorism: the rise and fall of the Uruguayan Tupamaros’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* vol.1 no.2 (1989), p.204.

²² John Stone, ‘Clausewitz’s Trinity and Contemporary Conflict’, *Civil Wars* Vol 3 Issue 9 (2007), pp.286-96.

²³ Smith and Stone, ‘Explaining Strategic Theory’, p.28.

²⁴ Schelling, *Choice and Consequence*, pp.198-199.

method to organise the analysis, which is useful in the sense that it can serve to trace lines of continuity in the process of strategic formulation of a political actor.²⁵ As Professor Lawrence Freedman has noted, the use of the term evolution on how strategic thinking develops might be misleading as it may suggest progress along a learning curve, thus implying that understanding is higher with the passing of time, however, strategic debates have tendency to be of a cyclical character, as much of the postures that are offered as insightful and novel today were already said yesterday.²⁶ This seems to be precisely the case with the Colombian military, where the current judgements and views about the employment of the resources at hand have had a long standing tradition in its thinking.

Literature review

In a country with one of the longest active internal conflicts in the world, it is not surprising that its study has been at the centre of attention for local academics. The high appeal for the study of the diversity of actors and aspects of the conflict by a large element of the social science community in the country, led to the christening of their subject of study as a separate knowledge field in itself: ‘violentology.’²⁷ Since the late 1960s, the academic niche of the so called ‘violentologists’ has been Bogota’s National University, the most important public university in the country, initially within its sociology department and, since its foundation in 1986, at its Institute of Political Studies and International Relations (IEPRI). At the IEPRI, legions of sociologists, political scientists, historians and economists have theorised, under different schools of thought, about the nature and socio-political implications of endemic violence in Colombia. The general surveys and interpretative analysis produced by these academics, especially due to their multidisciplinary approach, are important to consolidate

²⁵ Smith, *Fighting for Ireland?*, p.5.

²⁶ Freedman, *Nuclear Strategy*, pp. XVI – XVII.

²⁷ Gonzalo Sánchez and William Aviles, ‘Introduction’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 28: 5 (2001), p.6.

general background knowledge on the history and dynamics of the conflict, but given the span of their work it would be impractical to reference them all.

However, it is worth mentioning the volume *Pasado y Presente de la Violencia en Colombia* (1986), which is a collection of selected essays by the main figures of the ‘violentology’ community of scholars, and one of the most comprehensive overviews covering the antecedents and development of the conflict since its origins in the mid-1940s, and until the first peace process with the FARC which began in 1982. Curiously, the volume incorporated a chapter by French rural sociologist Pierre Gilhodés, a well renowned academic in Colombia for his works on agrarian struggles, who offered an interpretative study on the character of military thinking in the country, ‘El Ejército Colombiano analiza La Violencia’ (The Colombian Army analyses *La Violencia*). The volume of essays was later expanded and translated into English under the title *Violence in Colombia: The contemporary crisis in Historical Perspective* (1992), but sadly Gilhodés’ analysis of the Colombian military was left out. His chapter is well sourced and clearly written, building on diverse written documents including Colombian military journals, Ministerial reports to Congress and officers’ publications, amongst other sources, to shed light onto the rudiments of Colombian military thinking from the early 1930s to the late 1970s. Gilhodés’ main contribution was to establish the different attitudes and lines of thought that developed within the military establishment in their approach to the internal conflict. He offered illuminating insight into the tensions that arose during the genesis of revolutionary insurgency in the 1960s, and uncovered the divisions that consolidated in the military’s conception of the conflict divisions between a ‘traditionalist’ school, loyal to its Prussian origins and hence, in his opinion favouring the maintenance of the *status quo* through the use of force; and a ‘Korean’ school, of more progressive officers who promoted a new military doctrine that placed emphasis on military initiatives of economic development. However, Gilhodés’ work shows serious weakness. For a start, it is heavily

opinionated and forces the argument that the military has been merely an instrument of the Colombian elite, and had a fixation with uncovering internal enemies. In reducing the military to an agent of superior political interests, Gilhodés also insists on common places, like the one that all of the military's ideological and motivational influences are product of undue pressure from the United States. Likewise, some of his conclusions are dubious and showcase his lack of knowledge of strategic affairs, for example that no relationship can be established between the army's analysis and the characteristics, scope and frequency of military operations to combat the insurgency; or confusing and simplistic affirmations, such as: 'the rule of military classic thought, is that in war, first one shoots then one reflects.' Despite its deficiencies, his essay is important for this thesis as it was the first academic work to define the oscillatory nature of Colombian military thinking.

In general, the aforementioned community of Colombian social scientists has favoured the study of the nature and dynamics of violent social and political protest, and of the role played by the diverse armed groups that pullulate in the country. Noteworthy, for example are the works of sociologist Gonzalo Sánchez, founding father of 'violentology'. His book *Bandits, Peasants and Politics: The Case of la Violencia in Colombia* (2001 English edition), which was highly praised by the late Eric Hobsbawm who wrote the foreword of its first edition in Spanish in 1983, helped to place the period of escalation of the conflict between 1948 and 1965 in historical perspective. Likewise, Eduardo Pizarro's diverse works on the history of the revolutionary guerrilla groups, and especially his seminal work which was recently updated, *Las Farc: De guerrilla campesina a máquina de guerra, 1949-2011* (The FARC: From Peasant Guerrilla to War Machine 1949- 2011) are all well sourced solid accounts that help understand the longevity of the insurgency thanks to the a study of the development, application and revisions of their political and military strategies.

Pizarro has also gone beyond the socio-historical approach to the insurgency. It is important to note his 1996 book *Insurgencia sin revolución: La Guerrilla colombiana en perspectiva comparada* (Insurgency without Revolution: The Colombian Guerrilla in Comparative Perspective) which is a more analytical study, with constant references to military and revolutionary thinkers, to trace how different guerrilla warfare theories transitioned through Latin America, and evaluates how they were adopted, applied and revised in Colombia by different groups in different time periods. Pizarro moves to experiment with a series of concepts to evaluate the conflict, which can come handy in an analysis of the military and its own characteristics and problems in the formulation of strategy. For example he coined the term ‘negative stalemate’, as an alternative to ‘military stalemate,’ to convey the idea that despite maintaining its strategic superiority, the Colombian military was for many decades incapable of defeating or even weakening its adversaries. But Pizarro did not really intend to expand in the reasons behind the military’s own strategic deficiencies. In general terms, the Colombian military is merely ambient noise in the ‘violentologists’ works. Nonetheless, it is a body of work that is a useful secondary source for our own purposes, as the in-depth analysis they offer about the armed groups and insurgencies programmes can be used to obtain a better idea of the characteristics of the military’s thinking from the perspective of its adversaries.

There are a number of general histories of Colombian politics that are worth mentioning in this review that have served as important background reading for this study so far. David Bushnell’s *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (1993) is the first history published in English of what the author defined as one of the least studied, and probably the least understood of the Latin American countries. Bushnell’s is by far the most comprehensive introduction to Colombian modern history. The chapters dedicated to the 20th century give a solid account on the particularities of the political context from which the conflict emerged, though there are only scattered ideas about the history of the military in the

book. John Henderson's, *Modernization in Colombia: The Laureano Gomez Years, 1889-1965* (2001) is also a detailed and well narrated political history of the first half of 20th century. The last part of this book, which is an assessment of the socioeconomic development of the country during the latter 50s and early 60s, coupled with an earlier work by the same author, *When Colombia Bled: A History of the Violencia in Tolima* (1995) which is essentially a microhistory concerned with the emergence of the conflict in the Magdalena valley region of Colombia, were useful readings for the first part of this study. Marco Palacio's *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875–2002* (2006) and Daniel Pecaú's 2001 book *Orden y Violencia: Evolución socio-política de Colombia entre 1930 y 1953* (Order and Violence: Socio-political evolution of Colombia between 1930 and 1953) are two well researched social histories of the country that interpret the escalation of violence in Colombia as the product of a precarious state unable to impose its authority and legitimise itself. Pecaú's work is mainly analytical, focusing on the configuration of violence as a category of the political process in Colombia during the first half of the 20th century, and concluding that the military got involved in the political process both ways, as a perpetrator of violence against a particular political grouping, but also as an arbiter between parts.

The few Colombian academics that have written solely about the military have been mainly sociologists and political scientists that have leaned especially towards issues of civil-military relations and the fixation with military rule and civilian control of the armed forces, following the Latin American trend. Possibly, as a an American observer points out, the relatively minor role the Colombian military has played in the nation's political affairs, compared to the armed forces of other counties in the region, contributed to its lack of appeal as a subject of research. Francisco Leal's, *El Oficio de la Guerra: La Seguridad Nacional en Colombia* (The Trade of War: National Security in Colombia) published in 1994 is considered the classic work devoted to the Colombian civilian-military relations in the country. Professor

Leal is a sociologist of the ‘violentologist’ school trained in the US, who devoted himself in this book to analyse the impact in the Colombian military of what he denominated the backlog of the National Security Doctrine in the post-Cold War. His principal goal was to offer a set of recommendations for a redefinition of the concepts that had defined military thought in the country. Although the book is mostly conceptual with rigorously researched chapters devoted to the explanation of the rise and fall of the doctrine to later contextualise the way it was understood and applied in Colombia, two of its chapters are strictly historical in its scope, analysing with all its mishaps the evolution of military policy in the country from 1958 to 1991. One of Leal’s contributions, and which is of vital importance to this study, is his evaluation of the problems that since the 1960s the institutional autonomy of the Colombian military has generated for the design of defence and security policy in the country. His book is extremely well sourced, not only with a huge array of official documents, which he liberally quotes, but with interviews to key military officers which he transcribed.

Adolfo Atehortúa and Humberto Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia* (The Armed Forces and the State in Colombia) also from 1994, traces the institutional development of the modern military since its inception in the early 1900s up to the Korean War. The objective of the authors was to analyse the evolution of the relationship of the military establishment with the state, civil society and the political elites, and its functions with respect to the political system. It gives a detailed account of the early process of professionalisation of the Army and the influence of the diverse European military missions that tutored them, well sourced with written documents and statistics, permits the antecedents of the ideological strands which underpin military thinking in the country to be identified. The book, however, stops short by the mid-1940s proposing spurious conclusions resonant of the common places that characterise the military as an unreflective institution that turned into a coercive tool of the

political elite, and, that in the post war period it simply became 'entrapped in the doctrinarian and strategic parameters of US continental policy.'²⁸

In terms of civil-military relations another work worth mentioning is a thought provoking chapter by Douglas Porch, 'Preserving autonomy in Conflict: Civil-Military relations in Colombia,' which he prepared for the volume *Global Politics of Defense Reform* (2008), edited by his colleagues at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, Thomas Bruneau and Harold Trinkunas. Porch is a military historian that has left his mark with highly praised books on the French Army. During the early 2000s Professor Porch found himself teaching a great number of Colombian officers at NPS and regularly flying south to advise on diverse security and military matters, he became so interested in the country that he decided to spend a sabbatical there to deepen his knowledge. In this chapter Porch offers an extremely clear-sighted historical overview of the difficulties in civil-military interaction in the country and its consequences for the formulation of strategy. He charts a number of factors that help explain why, even though the Colombian military has been traditionally subordinate to political authority, the civilian government has struggled to make efficient use of military power. His analysis has been useful to delineate some of the constitutive elements of the Colombian strategic tradition in Chapter I.

Military history in Colombia has also been a neglected academic field. It has long been a monopoly of retired officers and civilian armchair historians who mainly concentrate on 19th century battlefield histories about the war of independence from Spain or the eight civil wars that followed. There is only one authorised history of the Colombian Armed Forces (*Historia de las Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*), edited in 1996 by one of Colombia's most renowned Generals, Álvaro Valencia Tovar. One volume, of the six it contains, is dedicated to the

²⁸ Adolfo Atehortúa and Humberto Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores – Universidad Javeriana, 1994), p.25.

military in the 20th century, and although its scope is narrow and sometimes apologetic, it provides some appreciation of the way the military has understood the conflict, and is an indispensable source for factual information. More recently, the origins of the professional Colombian Army and also the country's participation in the Korean War, which is considered by historians as a turning point, are subjects that have received some scholarly attention. Saul Hernández's 2006 book, *La influencia de los Estados Unidos en el Ejército Colombiano 1951-1959* (The Influence of the United States in the Colombian Army 1951-1959) is a pioneer work by a new generation of Colombian historians. One weakness of this work is that it approaches the configuration of the military under U.S influence focusing strictly on technical and organisational matters. But beyond the adoption of olive drab uniforms, US staff structure, doctrine, and other technicalities what has been, for example, the extent of Washington's influence in the formulation of military strategy? This is a central question which the author does not address.

On the other hand, the study of the Colombian military by Anglophone authors has followed a very different path to the work produced locally. Security assistance and military reform and modernisation have been two prime subjects of study in the past four decades. One set of authors who produced their work during the late 1960s and early 1970s were mostly former US officers who served in the Panama Canal Zone at Fort Gulick (The School of the Americas) or were part of the US Military Mission to Colombia. These works are essentially reminiscences of the first teams of counter-insurgency mentors and consultants like Richard Maullin's, *Soldiers Guerrillas and Politics* (1973) and Russell W. Ramsey's *Guerrillas and Soldiers* (1981), which are pertinent readings that highlight some of the views the US had of the conflict and the Colombian military during the early stages of the conflict. A second set of Anglophone authors have been producing their work since the early 1990s, and have benefited from a great deal of declassified documents of the US Government, hence amplifying the

description of the role played by Washington in assisting the Colombian military. Dennis Rempe is a Canadian political scientist with an interest in US policy in Latin America during the 1960s. He was the first to study the US military assistance programmes to Colombia during the period using recently declassified documents. His work was the first to highlight the immense potential for research about US involvement in Colombia during the early Cold War, publishing various articles in the journal *Small Wars & Insurgencies*.²⁹ Rempe's work is extremely descriptive, citing long tracts of the documents he undusted and does not engage with any analysis of the sources, taking for granted the information produced by the US authorities. Conversely, Bradley Coleman's, *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939-1960* (2008) can be singled out as the most thoroughly researched book on the early history of the origin and consolidation of military and security relations between both countries. Coleman's scholarship is undeniable, well familiarised with the literature produced in Colombia, and utilising a wide variety of archives in both countries, he offers a well-balanced narrative that serves to show that the appropriation of the concepts and means offered by Washington to the Colombians in those early years of the conflict was not lineal or clear cut, and that local considerations of a varied kind eventually determined the configuration of the aid and influenced the development of military strategy in the country. In this regard his work has been extremely useful as reading for the initial phases of this research which will focus precisely in his period of expertise.

In the past decade, with the initiation of 'Plan Colombia', a reinforced billion dollar assistance package that Washington offered the country between 1999 and 2010 for the upgrade of the armed forces, there has been a surge in the works produced in English about the

²⁹ Dennis Rempe's main articles in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* journal are: 'Guerrillas, Bandits, and Independent Republics: US Counterinsurgency Efforts in Colombia, 1959-1965', in Volume 6 (Winter 1995); and, 'The Origins of Internal Security in Colombia: Part I – A CIA Special Team Surveys la Violencia, 1959-1960', in Volume 10 (Winter 1999).

Colombian military. However, most of these have been strongly influenced by the advent of the so-called 'Low Intensity Warfare' literature that has decontextualised the Colombian conflict in an attempt to draw off 'lessons learned' that can be replicated elsewhere. Good examples of this sort of literature are Richard Downie's *Landpower and Ambiguous Warfare: The Challenge of Colombia in the 21st Century* (1999) which argued that the Colombian military was an inefficient fighting force because it lacked essential organisational learning practices. Also, Russell Ramsey III, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque: The Colombian Security Force Experience, 1998-2008* (2009), Thomas Mark's, *Colombian Army Adaptation to FARC Insurgency* (2002), and also his most recent book chapter 'Regaining the Initiative : Colombia versus the FARC insurgency'(2011).³⁰ These works have merely focused on the operational aspects and technical innovations of the last decade, especially those offered by US assistance, whilst minimising a six decade long history of Colombian military involvement in internal counter-insurgency as a mere historical contingency. Conversely, the chapter written by Douglas Porch and Christopher Muller, 'Imperial Grunts Revisited: The US Advisory Effort in Colombia' for Donald Stoker's *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815- 2007* (2008) takes a different approach, placing the role of US military assistance to Colombia within its historical context. As a critique of the ideas of analysts like Andrew Keprinevich and Robert Kaplan, who suggested that security assistance was a key tool for the success in the 'war on terror' through the transfer knowledge and technology to partner nations, the authors use the Colombian case to demonstrate that assistance seldom transfers unaltered to other national environments, mainly as it plays out in a strategic and political context that is unique to the recipient. Although Porch and Muller's assessment is principally devoted to the experience post-2000, they offer the reader an accurate

³⁰ Thomas Marks, 'Regaining the Initiative: Colombia versus the FARC insurgency' in Carter Malkasian and Daniel Marston, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2011).

picture of the composition of the value-system of the Colombian military after decades engaged in the conflict, and hint how the extensive US influence combined with local factors to influence the formulation of strategy.

In terms of more detailed strategic analysis, it is only possible to point to one single book chapter written by Román Ortiz and Nicolas Urrutia, two local experts who advised the Colombian Ministry of Defence on military and defence policy. Their chapter 'A Long Road to Victory: Developing Counterinsurgency Strategy in Colombia', in James Forest's compendium *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* (2006) gives a general overview of the evolution of the Colombian military response to insurgencies from the 1950s up the early 1990s, but it does so through a very technical-organisational approach. The authors are interested in the evolution of the strategic tradition as a means to contextualise the military campaign after 2002. They purport the current experience marks a breakthrough in quantitative and qualitative terms in comparison to previous decades thanks to a slow but successful process of military modernisation and reform; the introduction of novel operational concepts and the aid offered by the US which served to overhaul the counter-insurgency campaign. Their narrow synopsis of the early configuration and development of the military's strategic tradition evidences the need to expand the subject of study and produce a more comprehensive and systematic analysis. This thesis will attempt to make a contribution in this respect.

Primary Sources

A part from identifying gaps in the literature, the review has also served to highlight some of the relevant works relating to the Colombian conflict in general and the military in particular, which will serve to consolidate important background knowledge for the study proposed. The core of this research will, however, be based on primary sources. There is a great amount of

primary sources capable of being evaluated with reference to strategic theory to help construct an impression of the process of strategic formulation in Colombia during the formative years of the counter-insurgency tradition, that is, between 1948 and the late 1960s. Various types of sources provide the core documentary material for the study. Firstly, a number of unpublished declassified documents produced by the military including: manuals, strategic concepts and operational plans available in Colombian military's service school libraries. Also, published military official documents including diverse training material and journals like the *Revista Militar* (Military Review) *Revista de Infanteria* (Infantry Review) and the *Revista del Ejército* (Army Review) that contain a number of accounts and pronouncements of diverse Colombian officers that inform about their major strategic discussions. Secondly, a number of Colombian unpublished government documents which have arrived to the *Archivo General de la Nación* (the National Archive) and the Presidential Archive, both in Bogotá, despite the lack of comprehensive declassification laws in the country. Thirdly, the research was based on memoirs by retired officers, which offer some important insight about their value-system and allows an understanding of how they see themselves. A crucial text was General Álvaro Valencia Tovar's *Testimonio de una Época* (Testimony of an Epoch) published in 1992 and *Mis Adversarios Guerrilleros* (My guerrilla adversaries) published in 2006. Both books are in part a personal historical interpretation of Colombia in the 20th century, and also autobiographical with an account of his military experience during his Cadet years up to his promotion to Army Chief of Staff (CoS). Whilst obviously biased and self-praising, these books are revealing about the strategic debates within the military during the 1960s and the tense relations with the civilian governments. Other important books used are collections of articles and essays which expose some of the main ideas of varied military commanders, like General Alberto Ruiz Novoa's 1965 book *El Gran Desafío* (The Great Challenge), and General Fernando Landazábal's 1985 *El Precio de la Paz* (The Price of Peace) and his 1988 *El Desafío* –

Colombia: Sus problemas y soluciones (The Challenge. Colombia: Its problems and solutions).

The study has also used a great number of public statements and speeches of Colombian military and civilian leaders, available in compilations and in the press. Following from this, the Colombian and international press has been used to provide further support to analyse the course of the conflict and the evolution of military thinking in the country, and has served to contextualise official documentation and balance the *ex post facto* accounts of Colombian officers

Finally, Colombian sources will be combined with foreign unpublished sources. The study has relied extensively on a wide selection of US official documents that extend from the 1940s to the early 1970s produced by different agencies, including the US Embassy in Bogota; the Department of State; Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This documentation has been obtained from the Hoover Archives in Stanford, the National Archives in Washington, the Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS), and the National Security Archive as well as its online version the Digital National Security Archive, both administered by the George Washington University. These sources have been complemented with a token of British sources available at the National Archives in Kew, mainly originating from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that discussed Colombian military matters during the period studied.

Conclusion

The originality of this research resides in the method of analysis selected to approach the subject of study. In this sense, more than a history of the conflict and the Colombian military, which is already an understudied area, by using strategic analysis it will be possible to assess how as an actor the Colombian military has viewed the instrumentality of force and the political conduct of the conflict, which can provide useful answers as to the longevity of the conflict

itself. As has been shown in the literature review, there are only a few timid attempts, mainly at the level of book chapters and articles that have used strategic analysis to address some issues about the Colombian military's present experience in managing the internal conflict. Thus, this thesis will attempt to make a contribution to knowledge by examining thoroughly an understudied protracted internal war, utilising the conceptual framework of strategic theory. Moreover, the production of a comprehensive systematic analysis about the composition and evolution of military thought in Colombia, that is to say, the way the military conceived the use of means and ways to achieve ends, will offer insight into the recent behaviour of the military in the conflict and the challenges faced in the ongoing peace process with the FARC insurgency in Havana.

Having said this, it is necessary at this point to clarify the structure of the research. The thesis will begin by constructing the strategic tradition of the Colombian military, which provides the objective of both Chapters 1 and 2. Normally an evolutionary analysis like the one proposed in this research proceeds chronologically, however, the thesis takes a different approach. Chapter 1 begins with an analysis of the latest events, given the topical interest in the ongoing challenges of the Colombian conflict amidst the peace negotiations that began in Havana in November 2012, and the academic and policy debates over the future of counter-insurgency; that is the emphasis on what has been termed 'light' or 'small-foot print' assistance for which Colombia is being used as an instructive model to inform Western military needs. In this respect, Chapter 1 aims to place the current commentary on Colombia in historical perspective, introducing what can be termed as the long-term drivers of its military thinking, and which have been neglected due to the focus on the operational and organisational 'lessons learnt' approach of recent counter-insurgency literature. Chapter 2, for its part, introduces the themes that have historically influenced the evolution of Colombian military thought. The

themes examined serve as an analytical tool to structure the evolutionary analysis in subsequent chapters.

The intention, in the succeeding chapters will be to analyse how the crucial features of the Colombian military mind have influenced the way they have endeavoured to utilise the means at their disposal in different periods of the conflict. Chapter 3 will examine the origins of the Colombian military tradition. It will focus on the civil war known as *La Violencia* which raged through the 1950s and which can be considered as the foundational period of the debates that led to the adoption of counter-insurgency thinking in the country. The core arguments of the thesis are then developed in Chapters 4 and 5. These two chapters are devoted to the study of the 1960s where the weight of the analysis is placed on the reasons behind, and the dynamics of, the evolution of counter-insurgency thinking in the country. The early 1960s, which is the focus of Chapter 4, is a transitional period when the principal features of the varied strategic views of the Colmil are clearly discernible, and start interacting in oscillatory manner. For its part, the mid-1960s, as is discussed in Chapter 5, mark the maturation and consolidation of counter-insurgency in the Colombian military's strategic tradition amidst the escalation of the conflict. Finally, the evolutionary analysis of the origins of the Colombian strategic tradition will allow to reflect on how the formative period has shaped the current understanding of the nature of the conflict, the inclination to privilege certain means above others, and ultimately, offer a suitable explanation of the challenges in strategic formulation the country has faced throughout history.

CHAPTER I

THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY AND ITS FIGHT AGAINST THE FARC INSURGENCY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ¹

As emphasised in the introduction, whilst Colombia's recent offensive against the FARC is being considered a successful example at least in terms of battlefield results of both successful counter-insurgency and effective foreign security assistance by the US, there is a need to place in historical perspective the most recent effort by Comil to defeat the now half century old insurgency, that during the 1990s threatened to drop the government in Bogota to its knees. In this regard, it is necessary to restate once more that the main rationale behind this thesis is that the Comil's behaviour today against their main adversary, cannot be thoroughly understood without considering its protracted struggle against multiple bandit and insurgent groups.

In the preceding section it was also noted that most of the existing works dealing with the conflict mention the Colmil's past experience *en passant*, as a simple means to place their work within a wider context. Conversely, more specialised military literature dealing with Colombia since the 1990s has been strongly influenced by Low Intensity Warfare theory, and recently by the resurgence of counter-insurgency literature which echoes the theoretical precepts of the former. As strategic theorists have noted, both types of literature disconnect disparate conflicts from their historical and political settings by attempting to make theoretical generalisations based on tactics and the means employed by belligerents. ² This, in part, explains the emphasis of recent commentary about the Colmil produced in the West on issues of operational and tactical adaptation. Lately, the search has included that of transferable best

¹ An edited version of this chapter was published online as an article in The Journal of Strategic Studies in May 2015. See: Jorge E. Delgado, 'Colombian Military Thinking and the Fight against the FARC-EP insurgency, 2002-2014', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 38:6 (2015), pp.826-851.

² See for example: M.L.R. Smith., 'Guerrillas in the mist: reassessing strategy and low intensity warfare', *Review of International Studies* Vol. 29 (2003), p.23; M.L.R. Smith, D.M Jones and John Stone, 'Counter-COIN: Counterinsurgency and the Preemption of Strategy', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35:9 (2012), p.603.

practices in foreign military assistance, with the object of informing future interventions, particularly under the rubric ‘small foot-print’.³ The Colombian experience in the past decade has been cited as a promising example of this sort of approach.

Indeed, it is the tendency of counter-insurgency thinking to focus on the sequencing of tactical methods as the ordering principle for action which has led strategic theorists like M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones to define it as a form of ‘antipolitical instrumentalism’. According to them, COIN increases ‘complexity and flawed judgments and commitments when advanced as a standard model.’⁴ This occurs because COIN proponents have claimed that insurgency and COIN are a distinct category of conflict, and so insist that Clausewitz’s observation that war is a political phenomenon applies only to inter-state conflict. For this reason, COIN thinking ignores the importance that Clausewitz attached to ‘shaping one’s actions in regard to the wider political context in which they occur.’⁵ Likewise, military historians have also highlighted this apolitical feature of COIN thinking, arguing that the rejection by its proponents of the Clausewitzian character of war comes in favour of a Jominian posture, with tactics and operational methods as substitute for cohesive, balanced strategic judgement.⁶

With these points in mind, a contention of this thesis, then, is that any valuable analysis of the Colmil experience in the last decade requires us to go beyond the focus on the tactics

³ Examples of commentary and analysis include: Stephen Watts, et.al, *The Uses and Limits of Small Scale Intervention* (RAND Co: Santa Monica, 2012); Linda Robinson, *The Future of US Special Operation Forces*, Special Report No.66 (NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013); Dana Priest, ‘Covert Action in Colombia. U.S. Intelligence, GPS bomb Kits Help Latin American Nation Cripple Rebel Forces’, *The Washington Post*, 21 December 2013; James Stavridis, ‘Inshallah and Ojalá: The lessons of counterinsurgency and nation-building in Colombia can also apply to the Arab world’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 August 2014.

⁴ See for example: M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, ‘Whose hearts and whose minds? The Curious Case of Global Counterinsurgency’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33:1 (2010); M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, ‘Grammar but no logic Technique is Not Enough – A Response to Nagl and Burton,’ *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33:3 (2010).

⁵ Smith, et.al, ‘Counter-COIN’, p.603.

⁶ Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p.318; Alex Marshall, ‘Imperial Nostalgia, the Liberal Lie, and the Perils of Postmodern Counterinsurgency’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21:2 (June 2010), p.243.

and best practices transferred by United States to enhance the ‘host’ country’s capabilities. While US assistance has obviously played an important role in shaping the Colmil’s operational performance, the present analysis intends to focus on the long-term drivers that have defined the Colmil’s process of strategic formulation since the inception of the conflict. Following from this, the argument of this first chapter is that the contours of the offensive initiated under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe from 2002 can only be fully analysed in the context of the Colmil’s strategic tradition. This implies taking into account the factors that have formed the Colmil’s distinctive intellectual framework.

The aim in this chapter is to go beyond a mere narrative of operational success, and instead identify the tensions that have traditionally underpinned strategic thinking in Colombia. After all, strategy is about matching ends to means, and it would be surprising if over the last half-century of conflict Bogotá and its armed forces were not at times in disagreement over where that balance lay. Today, as former defence minister President Juan Manuel Santos caps off a decade of operational success by initiating peace talks with the FARC, is one of those times when the government and its military appear to be significantly at odds over the instrumentality of force to achieve political effects. Current civil-military altercations over the peace process are more than simply a debate over its timing. Rather, they shed light on how the military and the civilian leadership harbour differing views on the nature and behaviour of their FARC adversary, the objectives to be sought in the campaign, the limits of force in the conflict, and the meaning of victory. However, before commencing with the analysis of the basic assumptions and outlook that characterise Colombian military thinking, it is necessary to understand the recent political context, and in particular the changing government perceptions about the conflict and its diverse implications for the use of the armed instrument.

The politico-military setting, 1996-2014

The FARC insurgency only turned into a serious challenge to the Colombian state by the mid-1990s. Bolstered by the proceeds of cocaine production, it began to escalate the offensive it had set out in its 1982 'Strategic Plan for the Seizure of Power'. Militarily the plan called for a spreading of operations throughout the country, the levy of an army of 10,000 troops and a strategic deployment from the hinterlands onto the western Andes cordillera to encircle Bogotá.⁷ The plan began to be executed at full force by 1996, when then the FARC began to enjoy success on the battlefield, inflicting humiliating defeats on a static, under sourced, and demoralised military caught off guard by the increased operational tempo of the guerrillas. Resembling what some experts refer to as 'swarming,' in well planned operations executed by at least three independent FARC units, combined forces of 450 to 1500 guerrillas would attack an enemy target from different directions. In that manner, in just one year, eight army and police bases were overwhelmed and two army battalion size units almost annihilated.⁸ The insurgents also began to resource a massive reserve in the south-eastern jungles to sustain their strategy, as well as to hold hundreds of prisoners taken in their ambushes, along with civilian hostages who not only served to extract ransoms but also were expected to be bargained in negotiations with the government.⁹

⁷ Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, *Guerras Inútiles. Una historia de las FARC* (Bogotá: Intermedio Editores, 2009), p.78.

⁸ The main humiliating defeats of the Colmil in the period were the fall of the army base of Patascoy in December 1997 and the almost total destruction of a counter-guerrilla battalion in El Billar in March 1998. See: Russell Ramsey III, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix and Jaque: The Colombian Security Force Experience, 1998-2008* (Ft Leavenworth KA: CSIP, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2009). For detailed local accounts, see: 'El Billar el mayor desastre military de la historia,' *El Tiempo*, 28 April 2008. Available at: <<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-4129924>> (Accessed 13 March 2014); '12 años de la toma de cerro Patascoy', *Semana*, 23 December 2009. Available at: <<http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/12-anos-toma-cerro-patascoy/111455-3>>. (Accessed 13 March 2014).

⁹ A detailed analysis of FARC's use of political hostages as negotiation tool with the government can be found in the strategic dossier of the IISS: 'The FARC Files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the Secret Archives of "Raúl Reyes,"' *An IISS Strategic Dossier, International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 2011.

The military's situation in this period was also aggravated by a serious political crisis, triggered by accusations of links between President Ernesto Samper (1994-98) and drug cartels which had financed his campaign, who spent the duration of his mandate fighting against his impeachment. Samper effectively relegated military policy to a secondary matter of government, only to be startled by the FARC offensive which came to the fore with the fall of *Las Delicias* military base in Putumayo on 30 August 1996, the first major setback for the Army, in which 27 soldiers were killed and 60 taken prisoner.¹⁰ Eventually, FARC offered as a 'goodwill gesture' to release the soldiers they had bagged in exchange for the temporary demilitarization of Cartagena del Chaira a 13,000 km² municipality in Caquetá. According to the Chief of the Armed Forces, General Harold Bedoya, the guerrilla was black-mailing the President with its demands to clear territory for the prisoner exchange, and to follow suit was to put 'national security at risk.'¹¹ Despite the recommendations of his military chiefs, the government went ahead with the decision to demilitarize the area, which sparked one of the most acute civil-military crisis since the 1970s.

There was an increasing hostility from the military towards Samper, with rumours of *coup d' état* voiced at least twice between 1996 and 1997.¹² Amidst the operational setbacks of the army, the prisoner release demands of the FARC and the decertification of the Colombian government by Washington for its unreliability in the fight against drug trafficking, which brought military assistance to a halt,¹³ General Harold Bedoya declared in the national press that there was an 'evident lack of political will to face the FARC,' and that rather than

¹⁰ 'Interrogantes sobre el asalto a las Delicias', *El Tiempo*, 3 September 1996.

¹¹ Maria Teresa Ronderos, 'Harold Bedoya. De la Guerra a la Política,' *El Tiempo*, 10 May 1998.

¹² Porch, 'Autonomy in Conflict', p.131.

¹³ In 1996 and 1997 the State Department 'decertified' Colombia's cooperation with US. International drug control strategy, resulting in the cut off of many types of military assistance to the country. For more information and primary documents see: Michael Evans (ed.), *Guerrillas, Drugs and Human Rights in U.S. Colombia Policy, 1988-2002*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 69. Washington D.C: George Washington University, 2 May 2002. Available at: <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB69/part3.html#39>> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

negotiating with the enemy and giving him political recognition by ceding to its territorial demands, what was required was will to face the in its own terms and defeat it.¹⁴

After the prisoner release went ahead in June 1997 and the subsequent dismissal of General Bedoya for his opposition to the President's order, the military's misgivings with Samper's conduct of the conflict increased, particularly as the operational setbacks of the Colmil kept on mounting until the end of his administration in August 1998. During that year the FARC captured a further 200 soldiers and police of all ranks which they began to hold in makeshift prison camps in the jungle and paraded on national television. Amidst the escalating violence and the military's prostration, the opening of peace talks with the guerrillas became a feasible political alternative which began to receive wide popular support. In fact, the day local elections were held in October 1997 Colombians also had the chance to vote for a 'consultative poll' known as the Citizen Mandate for Peace to voice their support for a negotiated solution to the conflict and a 'humanitarian accord' to liberate all hostages and captured police and army personnel. Ten million votes were cast in favour of the initiative, setting the tone for the presidential election of May 1998 in which the subject of peace talks was to be the central issue. Conservative candidate, Andrés Pastrana, was able to secure an easy victory at the election. He got ahead of his competitors at the end of the campaign by meeting FARC commander 'Tirofijo', who agreed to initiate talks if the government guaranteed the insurgents the control of a Switzerland sized zone in the south of the country and removed all presence of the Colmil. The demand was considered to be attainable given the precedent of the demilitarisation for the prisoner release of *Las Delicias*. Pastrana agreed and disingenuously presented the zone as a gesture of goodwill from the administration in order to establish the peace process, not as a military gain by FARC. The Government did not refer to the area as a DMZ as the insurgent army would be in control and baptized it with the term *zona de*

¹⁴ Ronderos, 'Harold Bedoya,' *El Tiempo*, 10 May 1998.

distension, literally, *détente* zone. It was evident that the insurgents had the opposite reading about the nature of the area, referring to it as a ‘cleared area’ (*zona de despeje*). The political decision to remove the armed forces from the area was, for the FARC, the recognition of a military *fait accompli*: that they had gained effective control of the territory as part of their offensive and were, thus, a legitimate belligerent.¹⁵ Under the circumstances, the Colmil was left with no other option but to accept the Mandate for Peace and the terms of the ensuing negotiations, even if initiating them under the ascendancy of the FARC and ceding physical space to the adversary was seen as a self-defeating action by the Pastrana administration.

The Colmil was completely dismissive of the FARC’s peace intentions. Soldiers argued that FARC was not going to call off the ‘plan for the seizure of power’, and that in fact its strategy would be to combine the negotiations with a more assertive use of force to advance its end goal of toppling the government.¹⁶ These anxieties intensified on the eve of Pastrana’s inauguration the 6 August 1998, when FARC mounted more than 60 simultaneous attacks on military and civilian targets with the objective of paralysing the country, including the attempted destruction of Miraflores, the main counter-narcotics base of the country which was resourced by the US and where 129 of the 190 police and military officers present were taken prisoner. Despite the offensive, Pastrana did not change his mind about commencing the talks, and maintained that his will was to seek peace via an accord with the FARC. In the meantime, his recently appointed cabinet avoided further criticism with the simplistic argument that the latest insurgent attacks were a mere ‘farewell gift’ for the unpopular Samper rather than a message to the new President with whom they had the commitment to negotiate.¹⁷

¹⁵ Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, *Guerras Inútiles*, p.100.

¹⁶ Román Ortiz, ‘La Guerrilla Mutante,’ In Francisco Leal (ed.), *En la encrucijada: Colombia en el siglo XXI*, (Bogotá: Uniandes - Editorial Norma, 2006) p.335.

¹⁷ See for example: ‘Pastrana dice que ante todo continuara proceso’, *El Tiempo*, 6 August 1998; ‘Tenemos 129 prisioneros: Mono Jojoy’, *El Tiempo*, 8 August 1998.

President Pastrana's resolve to negotiate was put to the test in early November, a fortnight after the signature of the executive decree that authorised the creation of the cleared zone when 1,500 guerrilla fighters occupied Mitú, capital city of the Amazonian department of Vaupés in the frontier with Brazil. The occupation of a regional capital had been envisaged by the FARC's military commanders as the culminating point of the 1982 Strategic Plan, and amid the negotiations it gained new significance as it expected to generate greater political impact and increase bargaining options. It took the military almost three days to reclaim the city, pushing its scarce resources to the limit given the distance from Bogotá, including a plea to Brazil to allow the use of its airfields to refuel. An intercepted dispatch from the FARC military commander 'Mono Jojoy' to his troops on the aftermath of the operation was harbinger of the hard times to come for the military. 'We are at war and shall continue at war, nothing and nobody can distract us from our activities,' it read. The blow generated by the fall of Mitú, including the capture of 30 policemen – many of whom had to endure more than 12 years of captivity until their eventual rescue - and the publication of the guerrilla dispatch in the media, was followed by controversy in Bogotá over the benefit of offering the FARC a cleared area. The shock generated by the insurgent offensive, did not affect the President's decision to go ahead with the establishment of the zone.

While President Pastrana had assured his Chiefs of Staff that the zone would only have a duration of three months after the official initiation of talks in January 1999, it became a permanent fixture of the peace talks. It was renewed seven consecutive times until the collapse of the process in February 2002. Each executive decision to renew the zone, combined with the lack of definition protocols for its management, and the FARC's reticence to allow an international verification commission to act as guarantor only served to augment the frustrations of the Colmil. There was a general feeling that the government was improvising, and even worse, making a disproportionate concession to the insurgency without substantial

advances in the talks. Indeed, many officers felt the President was being pig-headed, as if he did not want to accept the strategic consequences of his decisions; in short, that the zone was providing the FARC with a safe haven from which to escalate its armed campaign and achieve its political goals.¹⁸ As ‘Simon Trinidad’ a member of the FARC’s Secretariat, stated in an interview for the international press early in 2001, ‘the cleared zone is a State in gestation.’ His bold claim did not elicit a government response which only served to increase civil-military tension.¹⁹ Colmil’s calls to put an immediate end to the cleared zone became more intense when intelligence sources found evidence that the FARC had built clandestine airstrips in the zone and that there was a substantial flow of weapons and hostages.²⁰ In August 2001, for example, three members of the Provisional IRA were arrested by the police after exiting the zone. Traces of explosives were found in their clothes confirming that they were providing training to the FARC.²¹ Despite all these dangerous signs, Pastrana ignored the demands of his Colmil chiefs to put an end to the *zona de distensión*.

How did President Pastrana maintain control over the military despite the unpopularity of the process and the graveness of the situation generated by the cleared zone? Basically, the president was able to prevent the military’s alienation thanks to the fact that since the early days of the administration he had hinted via his Defence Minister that that the strengthening of the military’s capabilities was going to be priority for his administration because it would serve as a guarantee for the peace process.²² Two early moves were essential in this regard. First he promoted a military leadership eager for reform after the debacle of the Samper era and the

¹⁸ ‘Gobierno de Andrés Pastrana,’ *Semana*, 1 April 2004, Available at: <<http://www.semana.com/online/articulo/gobierno-andres-pastrana/62716-3>> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Embassy to DOS, ‘Military Assessment of Situation in Putumayo and Impact on Plan Colombia’ Secret, Cable, Excised Copy, 010056, 14 November 2000. Accessed via DNSA.

²¹ For context, see for example: Jeremy McDermott, ‘Colombian Attacks ‘Have Hallmark of IRA,’ *BBC News*, 11 August 2002. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2186244.stm> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

²² Embassy to DOS, ‘CODEL Spence Meetings with Defense Minister Lloreda and military forces Chief General Tapias,’ Confidential, Cable, Excised Copy, 009798, 27 August 1998. Accessed via DNSA.

latest operational set-backs. Pastrana was to provide Chief of the Armed Forces General Fernando Tapias and Army CoS General Jorge Enrique Mora, two reform minded senior officers, with the political will and the resources required to begin a process of expansion and professionalization of the armed forces in exchange for their acquiescence to the terms of the peace negotiations. Respectively, the Chiefs of Staff guaranteed they would respect the President's political prerogative to conduct peace talks, with the caveat that it was their prerogative to voice concerns about the impact of the process to National Security which should not be considered as intervention in politics.²³ Second, the president began to lobby the Clinton administration arguing that any process of military upgrade depended on the reestablishment of US security assistance which had been frozen with the 'decertification' of Colombia during the Samper administration. The rapprochement with Washington was largely welcomed by the Colmil. The renewal of US military assistance required, however, a commitment from the Colmil to deal more bluntly with the drug trade and to take steps to improve its human rights record. But, despite its overemphasis on the counter-narcotics component, which forced the Colmil to recast essential strategic assumptions about the conflict, and consent to the US view that its solution required giving priority to the drug problem and not to the FARC's armed campaign. However, the support for Plan Colombia within the Colmil was unanimous, as it secured US\$6 billion in assistance for military and police modernisation.

However, 11 September 2001 radically changed the strategic setting and led Washington to recast its security priorities in Colombia. Fearing the growth of terrorist activity in the country due to the escalation of violence by the FARC and the paramilitaries, the new priority was to 'deepen engagement' with the Colombians to develop enhanced

²³ See: 'Gobierno de Andrés Pastrana,' *Semana*, 1 April 2004, Available at: <<http://www.semana.com/online/articulo/gobierno-andres-pastrana/62716-3>> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

counterterrorism capabilities.²⁴ Five months after the attack against the World Trade Centre in New York, the FARC took an airliner hostage in mid-air and forced it to land in the cleared zone in order to kidnap Jorge Eduardo Gechem, a Senator from conflict torn Huila, and who was a prominent member of the peace commission of the Chamber.²⁵ This action not only expedited the FARC's international designation as terrorist organization, but more importantly was the trigger for the fulminant termination by President Pastrana of the fruitless four-year long peace negotiations, who immediately ordered the reoccupation of the *zona de despeje* by the Colmil. Two months later, in May 2002, Álvaro Uribe was elected president of Colombia. Inaugurated in August 2002, Uribe pledged to take the fight to the FARC, then rebranded as a terrorist group. Undeniably, while Uribe's landslide victory in the polls represented a public endorsement for a more aggressive posture in dealing with the FARC, increased support from the US government negotiated by Uribe's predecessor put muscle behind Uribe's threat. In particular, the George W. Bush administration allowed Uribe to use key US military assets against the insurgency, most notably a robust fleet of Blackhawk helicopters and advanced intelligence platforms which had been originally allocated for counter-narcotics operations under *Plan Colombia*.²⁶

Perhaps the most remarkable change brought in by Uribe was his view of the nature of the enemy faced by the Colombian state. Whilst Pastrana indirectly bestowed a degree of recognition of FARC's political status by ceding to it a large swath of de-facto sovereign territory and agreeing to negotiate, Uribe on the other hand, never ceased to insist that Colombia faced a 'narco-terrorist' threat that had to be dealt with by force. 'Traditional Colombian politicians were in favour of dialogue with the armed groups, as the solution to

²⁴ US embassy to DoS, 'Enhancing Our Counterterrorism Strategy for Colombia', Secret, Cable, Excised Copy, 008767, 28 September, 2001, Accessed via DNSA.

²⁵ Juan Forero, 'Colombian Rebels Hijack a Plane and Kidnap a Senator', *The New York Times*, 20 February 2002.

²⁶ Dos to US Embassy Bogota, 'Targeting Terrorist Leaders in Colombia' [Heavily Excised], Secret, Cable, 008083, 6 September 2002. Accessed via DNSA.

violence,’ Uribe recounts in his memoirs; ‘in my opinion they erroneously equated appeasement with civility, as if the only function of the State was to act as mediator, instead of being the guarantor of security and territorial control.’²⁷ The emphasis on regaining territorial control for the state against a FARC that ruled much of the south-eastern territory and regularly severed highways connecting Colombia’s major cities, would serve as the guiding plan of action for his government’s counter-insurgency policy known as *Politica de Defensa y Seguridad Democratica* (Democratic Security Policy - DSP) published in June 2003.

By the end of 2006, the levels of carnage in the country had been significantly reduced. Homicide rates for example plummeted by 45 per cent, and the threat of FARC related violence in the main urban areas dissipated as well as the scourge of kidnapping-for-ransom, a reduction of 90 per cent according to official statistics.²⁸ The achievement of what could be termed ‘acceptable levels of violence’ appeared to move the conflict to a matter of secondary importance for Colombians, at least in the main urban areas. The progress in security assured Uribe a swift re-election for a second term in office in May 2006, after a bitter legislative and judicial fight to alter the Constitution to permit a president to succeed himself. Never before, in its four decades of existence, had the FARC-EP been subject to such persistent and tenacious military and political pressure during two consecutive presidential terms. Indeed, the pattern of Colombian counter-insurgency since its inception in the mid-1960s had traditionally seen hard-line presidents pursuing military action for a four year term followed by another four years of appeasement by presidents who hoped to convince guerrilla forces to lay down arms through persuasion.

Uribe’s re-election signalled a sustained military effort that further dislocated the FARC’s 1982 strategic plan. By 2006, the FARC which at the turn of the twenty-first century

²⁷ Álvaro Uribe Vélez, *No Hay Causa Perdida* (London: Penguin 2012), p.101.

²⁸ Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, *Anuario estadístico del sector seguridad: 2003 -2009* (Bogotá: Imprenta nacional 2009), p.145.

appeared to hold the whip hand with a guerrilla army estimated at 20,000 and formal control of the *zona de despeje* found that its manpower had been reduced by half, and that it had been relegated to the sparsely inhabited jungle periphery as the ‘territorial control’ phase of the DSP policy began to advance. The FARC retreat was particularly significant in Cundinamarca, Colombia’s capital department, which broke the insurgent’s stranglehold on the corridors leading to Bogotá from its main area of operations in the south eastern jungles.

In May 2010, Juan Manuel Santos was elected to succeed Uribe as President of Colombia. An economist who had transitioned from the leadership of ministries of trade and finance to serve as Minister of Defense during Uribe’s second presidential term, Santos had been one of the main architects of the Colombia’s military regeneration. Even informed observers expected him to continue Uribe’s policies untouched, and at first, things went according to script attempting to maintain the same offensive spirit.²⁹ Santos vowed to maintain his popular predecessor’s military pressure on the FARC. True to his promise, during his first year as president, Santos continued to intensify the military effort. He also stepped up the High Value Targets (HVTs) programme, a decapitation scheme that Santos had championed during his tenure as Minister of Defence. By November 2011, the government had been able to locate and eliminate the FARC’s top two commanders in succession: Jorge Briceño alias ‘Mono Jojoy’ and Guillermo Saenz alias ‘Alfonso Cano’. These high profile killings came on the heels of other spectacular successes including a cross-border attack in the Spring of 2008 of a FARC camp in Ecuadorian territory where the insurgent’s ‘foreign minister’ Raul Reyes was killed,

²⁹ As the Wall Street Journal Colombia correspondents recalled after the killing of one of FARC’s most able military commanders, ‘Mono Jojoy’: ‘Mr. Santos was beginning to feel political heat, as Colombians wondered whether he would be able to maintain the gains made by Mr. Uribe. On Thursday, Mr. Santos vowed to continue the campaign against the guerrillas. "This was Operation Welcome," he said in New York. "To the rest of the FARC—We are going after you." [...]Mr. Rivera, the defense minister, renewed a call to FARC leaders to turn themselves in. "Surrender and we will guarantee your lives," he said.’ Quoted in: José Córdoba and Darcy Crowe, ‘Colombia kills Guerrilla chief’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 September 2010. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703384204575509732682999678> (Accessed 13 May 2013).

and later that year of the hostage rescue operation *Jaque* which lent credence to the government narrative that Colombia's counter-insurgency apparatus had fully taken the measure of the FARC.³⁰ In conjunction with this decapitation scheme, Santos also continued Uribe's counter-insurgent 'territorial consolidation' approach which aimed to bolster government legitimacy through the delivery of essential services to the peasant population in areas reclaimed from insurgent control. This reclamation scheme included the promotion of alternatives to coca cultivation used by the FARC to finance its operations.³¹ The prospect of the end of a movement that had for a half century disturbed the peace of the nation often through brutal actions caused government popularity to increase substantially among a war-weary population.

Santos, however, abruptly changed tack a year into his presidency, as he began to distance himself from Uribe's 'terrorist menace' mantra, and instead announced the commencement of another round of peace negotiations with FARC in November 2012. The peace negotiations, which at the time of writing are ongoing in Havana, hold out the prospect of achieving peace via an agreement to cease the violence and incorporate the FARC insurgents into the political process. To lay the foundation, Santos' legislative agenda has included two laws ratified in May 2011: one to redistribute land to peasants -an issue which has been considered a main cause of the conflict- and another to pay reparations to victims of violence from public funds, including those affected by the actions of the armed forces. These were followed by the introduction of a constitutional reform act, known as *Marco para la Paz* (Legal Framework for Peace), which will put in place transitional justice measures for a reconciliation with FARC.

Santos' move is hardly without precedent in modern Colombian history. *La Violencia*, the civil war between the Liberal and Conservative parties, was resolved with a negotiation in

³⁰ Ramsey III, *From El Billar to Operations Fenix*, passim.

³¹ Jorge E. Delgado, 'Counterinsurgency and the limits of state-building: An analysis of Colombia's policy of territorial consolidation, 2006–2012', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26:3 (2015), p.413.

1958 which concluded with the amnesty and an attempted rehabilitation of pro-Liberal guerrilla groups. Likewise, the M-19, an urban guerrilla group, voluntarily disarmed in the late 1980s and formed a political party that had considerable success at the polls in the 1990s.³² Even Uribe negotiated the demobilization of the paramilitary groups between 2003 and 2006. He also put more resources into an individual demobilization programme which had basically offered guerrillas who turned in their weapons benefits for reintegration.³³ However, his protégé's decision to launch formal negotiations unsettled former President Uribe, who vehemently insisted that FARC 'terrorists don't meet the requirements for belligerent status' and questioned Santos' judgment in 'opening that door'.³⁴ Ever since, Uribe has emerged as Santos' most vocal political opponent, accusing him of betraying his mandate. 'Colombia is governed by someone who has equated our soldiers with terrorists,' the former President asserted in July 2013, accusing Santos of reviving a moribund insurgency by offering a superfluous dialogue.³⁵ Santos was surprised to discover that Uribe and his narrative still resonated with sectors of the Colombian public, to the point that a new political party, which emerged under the ex-president's leadership to oppose Santos' policies, succeeded in capturing the second largest number of seats in the March 2014 congressional elections, and narrowly failed to defeat Santos' bid for a second term in the May-June presidential elections.³⁶

But even with the presidential elections behind him, Santos must contend with a Colmil that remains highly suspicious of its former defence minister and now commander-in-chief.

³² See: Mauricio García, Vera Grabe and Otto Patiño, *The M-19's journey from Armed Struggle to Democratic Politics*, Berghof Transitions Series No. 1 (Berlin: Berghof Center, 2008). Available at: http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Transitions_Series/transitions_m19.pdf (Accessed: 13 May 2013).

³³ William Rosenau, et.al, 'Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia's Database of Demobilized Militants', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26:2 (2014), pp.277-285.

³⁴ "Hace rato hay conflicto armado" dice JM. Santos', *El Tiempo*, 4 May 2011.

³⁵ 'Colombia no está en guerra, el Gobierno trata de justificar asesinato de soldados: Uribe', Caracol Radio, 28 July 2013, <www.caracol.com.co/noticias/actualidad/colombia-no-esta-en-guerra-el-gobierno-trata-de-justificar-asesinato-de-soldados-uribe/20130728/nota/1940649.aspx> (Accessed on 4 August 2013).

³⁶ 'Uribe's wrath', *The Economist*, 31 May 2014.

That suspicion comes naturally to a military that nurtures a congenital ‘stab in the back’ anxiety. Uribe articulated a view within an influential sector of the Colmil that feels the FARC is not only on the ropes and close to defeat, but also that the guerrilla leadership has no real interest in peace. Soldiers argue that the FARC-EP will not call off their 1982 ‘Strategic plan for the seizure of power’, given that their Marxist-Leninist creed translates into a belief that the triumph of their revolutionary goals is inevitable. Hence, members of the Colmil have argued, like they have done in past negotiations, that for the FARC, peace talks are nothing more than a tactical ruse which will allow them to regroup and muster international support for their cause.³⁷ A second, less publicized fear is that the termination of successful negotiations may see some soldiers prosecuted for war crimes, although Santos has attempted to pre-empt this by urging congress to pass a law that expands the jurisdiction of military courts, where few convictions are anticipated.³⁸

These attitudes toward the adversary combined with the peace process began to rekindle civil-military tensions that had lain dormant during the operationally triumphal Uribe years (2002-2010). The fact that the FARC, for the first time in history, is negotiating from a weak military and political position has done little to assuage military anxieties. In such situations in the past, elements of the Colmil have colluded with vigilante paramilitary groups or used ‘dirty war’ tactics, including assassination, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, to undermine the government’s peace initiatives.³⁹ Allegations circulated during the 2014

³⁷ A good source with in-depth commentary about Colmil anxieties with the Peace process in Havana is the Human Rights advocacy group Washington Office on Latin American (WOLA). Adam Isacson, a Senior Associate of WOLA with years of expertise on the country, has documented various episodes of military unease and quoted various senior officers opinions on various reports. For a summary see his blog entry: ‘Colombia’s military: Supporters or Saboteurs of the Peace Process?’ WOLA Commentary and Analysis, 21 January 2015. Available at: http://www.wola.org/commentary/colombia_s_military_and_the_peace_process (Accessed 11 October 2015).

³⁸ Joel Gillin, ‘UN urges Colombia not to further amplify military justice’, *Colombia Reports*, 30 September 2014, Available at: <http://colombiareports.co/un-urges-colombia-not-to-further-amplify-military-justice/> (Accessed 19 November 2014).

³⁹ One documented case of vigilante action by discontent sections of the armed forces, who retaliated against the insurgent’s use of terrorist tactics with their own proactive use of terrorism, was that of the *Alianza Anticomunista*

elections that Uribe's camp attempted to sow indiscipline within the ranks, and that rogue elements within Army intelligence have been illegally eavesdropping on FARC and government negotiators with the intention of sabotaging the process.⁴⁰ There are no doubt several agendas here, among them political and patronage networks in the military that are in competition as part of talks of 'post-conflict scenarios' that include defence budget and personnel reductions.⁴¹ But more significantly, Uribe's opposition to Santos' peace negotiations with FARC is more than a mere dispute over timing and methods, but also reveals fundamental differences in the understanding of the conflict, not just between Santos and Uribe, but also between distinct sectors of the Colmil.

Recognising the limits of military force and understanding that, in the Clausewitzian sense, war tends toward escalation until policy imposes limits on it, Santos views negotiations as the most cost-effective way of trying to end the long-running conflict. The present negotiations also offer recognition that the FARC articulates genuine grievances that are a source of Colombia's instability, even if since the mid-1990's they have deployed them for cynical, self-serving purposes. The belief that grievance mitigation offers the key to conflict resolution is in line with the ideas of some Colmil officers who since the 1960s have espoused a state-building approach to COIN. On the other hand, Uribe's position is in sync with more conservative sections of the Colmil who feel that they have dominated their enemy tactically and operationally, and fear a stab in the back if the Havana peace process succeeds. This is for

Americana or Triple A, a group set up by rogue Colombian army intelligence officers who began a bombing campaign against communist party assets and personnel. According to US embassy records, Uribe's former Army CoS, the 'traditionalist' General Mario Montoya participated in the Triple A when serving as Lieutenant. See: Michael Evans (ed.), *Truth about Triple A. National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 223* (Washington D.C: George Washington University, 2007)

Available at: <<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB223/>> (Accessed 13 May 2014.) For more on rogue actions of sections of the Colmil during the 'dirty war' of the 1980s, see: Stephen Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia*, (New York: Routledge 2004).

⁴⁰ 'Uribe's wrath', *The Economist*, 31 May 2014.

⁴¹ Adam Isacson, 'Colombia's military: Supporters or Saboteurs of the Peace Process?' WOLA Commentary and Analysis, 21 January 2015. Available at: http://www.wola.org/commentary/colombia_s_military_and_the_peace_process (Accessed 11 October 2015).

two reasons. First, that Santos ‘will sign away at the peace table a victory they have won in the field.’⁴² Secondly, that former insurgent leaders will be allowed to sit in Congress and dictate policy, as happened after the demobilization of the M-19 and EPL in 1990. That said, while the Colmil shares attitudes about war and peace generic to most military organizations, it also has a fractured tradition, the product of its different, often contrasting, understandings of the nature of war and of the Colombian conflict in particular.

Colombian martial traditions and the instrumentality of force

Since the mid-1950s, Colombian military thought about the instrumentality of force has separated into two perspectives. The first author to analyse the rudiments of this dichotomy was Pierre Gilhodes, who examined the Colmil’s role in politics following the civil war known as *La Violencia* between the Liberal and Conservative parties that raged from 1948 until resolved by political compromise in 1958. The end of *la Violencia* was not the end of conflict in Colombia, however, the civil war spun off new insurgent groups un-reconciled to the Liberal/Conservative compromise, including the FARC, the ELN and M19. Gilhodes observed that a part of the Colmil had come to believe that Colombia remained at war after 1958, which required a total victory over such groups and the political organizations that allegedly supported them.⁴³ It was a view that took hold in other Western militaries in the same period, as political movements produced insurgencies across Latin America and elsewhere. In contemporary parlance, this attitude translated into ‘enemy centric’ COIN with an emphasis on decapitating the subversive leadership and treating those who supported them as irredeemable social

⁴² Douglas Porch, ‘Expendable soldiers’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25:3 (2014), p.708.

⁴³ Pierre Gilhodés, ‘El Ejército Colombiano analiza la violencia’, In Gonzalo Sánchez and Ricardo Peñaranda (eds.), *Pasado y Presente de la Violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Fondo Editorial CEREC, 1986), p.332.

elements, not ‘biddable’ populations to be won over. This view reached its apogee in Latin America during the ‘dirty war’ in the southern cone in the 1970s.⁴⁴

A second faction in the military, according to Gilhodes, viewed insurgency as the product of unresolved socio-economic grievances,⁴⁵ whose focus translates into what is currently referred to as ‘population-centric COIN’. In Latin America, and in particular in the Andean countries, this outlook had its origins in the Kennedy administration’s Alliance for Progress which sought to gain popular support via economic and social development programs in great part executed by local militaries, which were exhorted to assume a state-building role.⁴⁶ This chapter argues that these two military traditions continue to be represented in the Colmil and in many ways have determined the attitude of the military toward the current peace talks taking place in Havana since November 2012.

One of the faces of the tradition can be labelled Korean or Intellectual, and is supported by a set of officers – and recently civilian MoD officials, who believe that the military instrument in its ‘conventional’ understanding has limitations in efficiently confronting insurgency. This requires the military to apply special techniques and adopt political skills. As the name suggests, the origin of the Korean tradition can be traced to the Colombian Battalion’s experience in the Korea War under the umbrella of the US Army. Essentially, it relates to a key group of officers who remained in active service upon their return home in 1953 and were soon deployed to address the growing unrest of *La Violencia*.⁴⁷ As will be analysed in Chapter 4, it

⁴⁴ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, pp.230-231; An strategic analysis of the ‘dirty war’ in the Southern Cone can be found in: M.L.R. Smith and Sophie Roberts, ‘War in the Gray: Exploring the Concept of Dirty War’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31:5 (2008), pp.377-389. See also: David Pion-Berlin and George A. Lopez, ‘Of Victims and Executioners: Argentine State Terror, 1975-1979’, *International Studies Quarterly* 35:1 (1991), pp.63-86.

⁴⁵ Pierre Gilhodés, ‘El Ejército Colombiano’, p. 332.

⁴⁶ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, pp.224-225.

⁴⁷ Colombian scholar Francisco Leal refers to the ‘Koreans’ as the ‘Sociological School of the Colmil’. See: Francisco Leal, *El Oficio de la Guerra* (Bogotá: TM Editores/IEPRI, 1994). On the other hand, it was Universidad Javeriana professor César Torres del Río who publicized the term ‘Korean School’, who used it interchangeably with Leal’s ‘Sociological School. See: Cesar Torres del Río, *Fuerzas Armadas y Seguridad Nacional* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2000).

was due to their proximity to the United States that these officers soon became the main conduit for the Colombian military's adoption of counter-insurgency in the early 1960s, which understood it as a special category of warfare influenced by the tenets of French *guerre revolutionnaire* theory. As M.L.R. Smith has noted, the 'intellectual attempt to carve out insurgency as a separate category of warfare can be traced to the French experience in Indochina', in particular the introspections of Colonel Roger Trinquier who argued that 'Western powers were facing a qualitatively new type of war that required fresh methods and doctrines.'⁴⁸ The 'Koreans; were from the outset inclined to these ideas as they were in tune with their understanding of the character of Colombia's conflict and in particular about the nature of the multiple guerrilla groups that had arisen from *La Violencia*.

The 'Koreans' also received the label of 'Intellectuals', as many officers, like General Álvaro Valencia Tovar, who was promoted to Army CoS in the early 1970s, had an affinity for humanities and social sciences, and hence, were keener to embrace the state-building and the hearts and minds narrative that underpinned 'population-centric' counter insurgency during the 1960s.⁴⁹ Furthermore, because the 'Koreans'' approach recognized the social and political underpinnings of insurgency, they have been more open, at least in theory, to negotiation as a war termination strategy. For them force should be employed selectively as one of several tools to manipulate the incentives of the rural population that support the insurgency and persuade

⁴⁸ M.L.R. Smith, 'COIN and the Chameleon: the Category Errors of Trying to Divide the Indivisible', In Gventer, et.al, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*, p. 37.

⁴⁹ Leal, *El Oficio*, 205; for more on the soldier-scholar reputation of Alvaro Valencia Tovar see also: Russell W. Ramsey, 'Insecurity and Violence in Colombia,' *Military Review*, Vol. 79, No. 4, July/August 1999. The identification in Colombia of Korea war veterans, led by Valencia Tovar, as a separate class of officers that promoted 'population centric' counter-insurgency techniques as central tenet of state-building, can be traced to the civil-military crisis of 1974 when Valencia Tovar was dismissed from his position of Army CoS. Apart from Valencia Tovar, two other leading Korea veterans close to his ideas about population centric counter-insurgency, Generals Gabriel Puyana Garcia and Joaquin Matallana were also dismissed. According to Puyana: Korea veterans 'personified a progressive trend that confronted a line of traditionalist generals. Ironically, President Lopez Michelsen approved the dismissal of the soldiers that had the most ideological affinity with him.' See: Gabriel Puyana, *Vivencias de un ideal. Relatos que pueden ser historia*, (Bogotá: Editorial Guadalupe, 2001), p.439; Joaquín Matallana, *Paz o Guerra: Alternativa del 84* (Bogotá: Antares, 1984), pp.70-76.

them to return to legality. The role of the Colmil was to engage in state-building, with various aims, including making their presence felt in remote territories where rebel groups germinated, and bring essential services to improve the lives of the population by addressing their legitimate grievances, hence separating them from the insurgents. In this sense, and as it will be discussed in Chapter 2, the state-building narrative reinforced the sense that the military had a civilising mission, that is, it could help re-educate, rehabilitate or reintegrate a backward population that was easily indoctrinated by communist agents.

The ‘Korean’ demand for non-combat roles via state-building has been a traditional source of civil-military tension that has stymied effective strategy formulation, as this thesis will argue later. One main reason is that the adoption of the state-building narrative has resulted in a high degree of politicization of the armed forces leading to a propensity to clash with its civilian masters and consider intervening in politics. This is not an original nor unique phenomenon to Colombia. Already by the mid-1960s, for example, US officials were warning that the profusion of counter-insurgency methods in the third world, like Civic Action, could lead to increased military Bonapartism.⁵⁰ In the Colombian case, civilians, on the one hand, have been suspicious of what they consider inappropriate military intervention into the policy-making realm, whilst on the other, the military complains that political priorities are not those that would attenuate the country’s endemic violence, and furthermore that the civilian government’s administrative incompetence are the main reasons that gave rise to insurgent challenges in the countryside. As an army operational manual observed in 1979, ‘inattention from official organisations to solve different issues and needs of the rural population, are ingredients of dissent that subversive groups take advantage.[...] From this follows that

⁵⁰ Department of State, ‘Details of U.S.-supported civil action programs in more than 30 countries, which have generally advanced internal security, economic, and social development, and U.S. political objectives at a loss of less than one percent of the Foreign Assistance Program’. N.d (ca.1965), Confidential Report. Accessed via DDRS.

counter-insurgency operations require military, political, economic and social actions.’⁵¹ The rudiments of these tensions between civilians and soldiers were succinctly put by an officer who requested anonymity during an interview in 1985:

If we ask that they [the politicians] purchase airplanes, ships and guns for us, that is understandable and they give us millions. But if we ask for resources to invest in the violent regions it is considered that we are going to substitute ourselves for the guerrilla or the political parties, and that, maybe, if the military resolves the problem we are going to appear like a viable political option, and that is detrimental to them [...] It is going to be difficult to find a solution to our social and political problems while we don’t reach the conclusion that this war is not only about shooting. There will have to be a few shots and they will have to be very accurate, but the rest is eminently political. Some of my fellow officers believe that “what is political, let it be arranged by the politicians.” But politicians also have limitations.⁵²

A second group of officers see themselves as an apolitical force who views war, internal or external, as their technical-professional niche. This school can be labelled ‘Traditionalist’ or ‘Prusso-German,’ as it traces its origins to Colombian military professionalization between 1907 and 1930 under Chilean and German influence. However, like the majority of the Colmil since the early 1960s, these officers were also mentored in the United States, and in fact, a few of them were also Korea veterans. Nonetheless, as a group, they have not considered their mission as a distinct category of warfare, as do the Koreans. For advocates of the ‘Traditionalists’ or Prusso-German school, politicians should stay out of military affairs until the army delivers victory.⁵³ Needless to say, these Prusso-Germans have more in common with von Moltke than Clausewitz in their politics and their view that military victory has to be swift and conclusive. However, contrary to von Moltke’s thinking on the adaptive nature of strategy, Traditionalists have been focused on defining fixed precepts and general principles for military action.⁵⁴ This mind-set, as will be explained in the following section, has created serious

⁵¹ Ayudantía General del Comando del Ejército, *Instrucciones Generales para Operaciones de Contra Guerrillas*, (Bogotá: Imprenta del Ejército, 1979), p.20.

⁵² Quoted in: Olga Behar, *Las guerras de la paz* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1985), p.134.

⁵³ Douglas Porch, ‘Preserving autonomy in Conflict: Civil-Military relations in Colombia’, in Thomas Bruneau and Harold Trinkunas, *Global Politics of Defense Reform* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).p.125.

⁵⁴ For a synthesis of von Moltke’s approach to strategy see: Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.103-107, 241.

problems at the level of strategy formulation. In particular, it has mired the clear definition of the goals that the armed instrument is supposed to achieve. Rather, the military mission boils down to a rather vague requirement to uphold order with tactical means that left the military with a free hand to achieve ‘victory’ due to the lack of proper political guidance.⁵⁵

The one thing that these two Colombian military traditions hold in common, which has ensured a degree of inner consistency in Colombian military thought across the years, is mistrust of civilians. As this thesis will argue throughout, this is a product of several intertwined factors: the absence of clear political guidance; the lack of a strategy-making process; the discontinuity in government posture towards the insurgents which oscillates between belligerence and compromise; and finally the requirement to adhere to civil rule of law protocols which, the military feels, both unduly ties their hands in the conduct of operations and puts them at risk of prosecution should they overstep some invisible boundary as defined by the courts.

The military solution – Can an insurgency be defeated in the battlefield?

The ‘Traditionalist’ section of the military, with its more customary understanding of strategy as grand tactics, had for long dreamed of a decisive battle in the war against FARC—a Dien

⁵⁵ This argument that the Colmil has historically lacked political guidance is constantly put forward by ‘Koreans’ Valencia Tovar and Puyana Garcia in their respective works. The latter, for example, argues that this has been the case since the campaign against the first rebel groups of Los Llanos in the 1950s, and has become constant throughout the conflict. This, he explains, has led to an erroneous use of force by the Traditionalists. For example, he sustains that Operación Casa Verde in 1990, when the Colombian government ordered the invasion of the FARC headquarters after the guerrilla rejected peace talks. ‘Attacking Casa Verde was a strategic mistake’, writes Puyana, ‘The operation was a military success and demonstrated the Army’s capability to capture targets that were considered inaccessible. But there was no political objective, and if there was one, it did not coincide with the National Interest to achieve pacification, and led to a new escalation of violence from the FARC [...In the execution of this type of operation, we keep confusing strategic priorities. They cannot be the physical elimination of the adversary, be them guerrilla, bandits or outlaws. The priority is the conquest of the civilian population.’ See: Puyana, *Vivencias de un ideal*, p.485.

Bien Phu à la Colombienne where the Colmil could result victorious.⁵⁶ As an army General explained in the early 1990s: ‘we need a conclusive military success, to get the insurgents to kneel down and from that position negotiate.’⁵⁷ However, there has been a lack of clarity in defining what is to be regarded as conclusive, short of unconditional surrender. During the 20th century two influential experiences for the Colmil, and in particular for the ‘Traditionalists’, encouraged the view that insurgencies could be defeated in the battlefield. The most clear-cut experience was the defeat of the Maoist *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) in 1990, which broke the myth that the guerrillas could not be defeated. Founded in 1967 after the splinter of the pro-Chinese bloc from the Colombian Communist Party, the 2000 strong EPL was active in a small geographic area in the North East of the country, between the departments of Cordoba and Antioquia. In that area, a dedicated Colmil Mobile Brigade was able to manoeuvre autonomously with a combination of surprise, mass and actionable intelligence fashioned from a willing civilian cooperation. The ensuing heavy damage inflicted upon the guerrilla group accelerated the leadership’s decision to sue for peace.⁵⁸

In the late 1990s a more refined view of conflict termination developed when President Pastrana’s peace negotiations stalled at the moment that his process of military modernisation started to produce tangible operational results. In an interview in late 2001, the Chief of the Armed Forces, General Fernando Tapias laid out the understanding of the instrumentality of force as a way to force FARC into negotiations, rather than produce decisive victory. The

⁵⁶ Since *Operación Soberanía* in 1964 with the occupation of ‘Marquetalia’, the base area of the guerrillas that would form the FARC two years later, the Colmil has designed various operations aimed at destroying the FARC’s forces. The most significant have been *Operación Casa Verde* in 1990, *Operación Destructor II* in 1997, and *Operación JM* in 2005 and since 2012 *Operación Espada de Honor*. For more details on the decisive battle mentality in the Colmil see: Román Ortiz and Nicolás Urrutia, ‘A Long Road to Victory. Developing Counterinsurgency Strategy in Colombia’, In James J. Forester (ed.) *Countering terrorism and insurgency in the 21st century*, Vol.3 (Westport CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), pp.317-320.

⁵⁷ Olga Behar, *Las guerras de la paz*, p.308.

⁵⁸ See: Hugo Tovar ‘Operación Final contra el EPL,’ In Glenda Martínez (ed.), *Hablan los generales* (Bogotá: Norma, 2006), pp.191-203.

object, explained General Tapias is ‘obviously not killing 30,000 guerrillas. What it is about is to weaken them militarily until they see in negotiations the best way out of the conflict. The Guerrilla must understand that it cannot take power by force.’⁵⁹

The key point is that Traditionalists have faulted the politicians for lacking the will to pursue the war against the FARC to military victory.⁶⁰ Escalation of insurgent violence permitted governments throughout much of the 20th century to declare ‘states of emergency’, allowing them to rule by decree, empower the military, and constrain individual liberties for prolonged periods to re-establish public order. But, the new 1991 constitution limits the executive’s recourse to ‘states of emergency’ to a maximum of 6 months with oversight from a supreme Constitutional Court with the power to overrule the executive’s special powers. Criticisms of these provisions by ‘Traditionalists’ were voiced publicly by General Juan Salcedo Lora, Inspector General of the Army in the mid-1990s:

The military has the capacity to combat and defeat its enemies and to control extensive areas, the population included. But the new constitutional arrangements and so many mechanisms alien to military operations, become in the long run an obstacle. So many civil rights spread through the country - that look more like landmines - all the new writs, prosecutors, ombudsmen, observers, biased verification commissions and the innovative presence of international oversight affect the conduct of military operations.⁶¹

‘States of emergency’ were seen by the Traditionalists as civilian acquiescence to the prospect of a military solution short of a formal recognition of a state of war. This was particularly the case in the period 1978-82, when to face the growing threat of the M-19 urban guerrilla, the government of President Julio Cesar Turbay signed a decree introducing heavy

⁵⁹‘Estamos Ganando’, *Semana*, 24 September 2001. Available at: < www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/estamos-ganando/47396-3 > (Accessed 13 March 2014).

⁶⁰ A recorded case that helps to illustrate this tension was the dismissal of the Army CoS General Jesus Cabrales and his deputy General Nelson Mejia in March 1990 for their criticism of the government. The Barco administration had thought it might necessary to launch an offensive against the FARC, after the group had violated a truce, but given that the country was on eve of elections decided otherwise. General Mejia publicly ‘unleashed a barrage of words, blaming the meager results of the struggle against the guerrillas on the lack of political will displayed by the government, specifically, the president of the republic.’ Quoted in: ‘Reasons for military changes outlined’, *90SM0173A Bogota Semana in Spanish*, 26 June 1990. Accessed via FBIS.

⁶¹ Juan Salcedo Lora, ‘Aspectos Psicológicos de la confrontación que vive el País’, *Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas* Vol. 52 No. 162, March (1997), p.33.

handed security measures. One of the measures allowed the military to intern anyone under suspicion of conducting subversive activities and court martial them, which resulted in the arrest of the entire leadership of the group. However, the declaration of a general amnesty as a prelude to peace talks by his successor, President Belisario Betancur, resulted in the suspension of these measures which deeply upset the Traditionalists. Ever since that first failed peace process with the *Coordinadora Guerrillera Simon Bolivar*, a short-lived coalition of the FARC, ELN and M-19 during the talks, many officers have concluded that the war is winnable if the politicians give them a free hand and give up the idea of negotiations. In 1984, President Betancur fired his Minister of Defence, General Fernando Landazábal for his continued public opposition to the peace process. 'The country should get used to listening to its generals,' conveyed Landazábal.⁶² Evidently, his opinions were not well received by the political elite who considered the General broke the non-deliberative spirit of the Colmil which expedited his removal. But the important continuity, is that similarly to the anxieties voiced by soldiers today apropos the demobilisation terms negotiated in Havana with FARC, Landazábal in 1982, feared the government would cede too much in its offers of amnesty to the insurgencies. The assessment of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) at the time, would, with no doubt make perfect sense today to the 'Traditionalists' of Colmil:

Military distrust of the guerrilla's motives runs deep and could spark a serious rift between the government and the Armed Forces if the amnesty concedes too much to the insurgents without adequate reciprocity. The leadership of the Armed Forces claims the guerrillas are not negotiating in good faith but are simply bargaining for time to rebuild their forces. Moreover, they are suspicious of the FARC-EP's late blooming interest in peace talks. Although Landazábal has said the Armed Forces would not be an obstacle to peace, he continued to press the military's demand for a surrendering of arms and the exclusion of certain crimes from the amnesty. Military leaders have resigned themselves to the inevitability of some form of amnesty, and in the end, they may well slightly modify their position [...].⁶³

⁶² Frank Bajak, 'Ex- Colombia Defense Minister Slain', AP News, 12 May 1998, <<http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1998/Ex-Colombia-Defense-Minister-Slain/id-71b0b33716191bc7e1a9b80b5b92678c>> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

⁶³ Defense Intelligence Agency, 'Colombia: The Army and Amnesty' Secret, Intelligence Appraisal, December 29, 1982. Accessed via: DNSA.

A more recent case in point that illustrates the Colmil's discontent with the civilian leadership consideration of open-ended negotiations as a war termination policy, was the firing in 1997 of the Chief of the Armed Forces, General Harold Bedoya. He publicly criticized President Ernesto Samper's decision to demilitarise a county in return for releasing a group of POWs as a prelude to initiate peace talks. Like Landazábal before him, General Bedoya was accused of insubordination after calling Samper 'unreliable' for putting 'national security at risk'. Bedoya's removal sparked an unprecedented public protest of over 200 field grade officers who demanded that he disobey the president's decision.⁶⁴

After less than a week in office, Uribe also declared a state of emergency (*estado de conmoción interior*), which he used to pass a decree to create 'Zones of Rehabilitation and Consolidation' in areas with high insurgent activity. This established direct military rule in those zones, annulled the need for search warrants, permitted the use of massive detentions, and allowed the use of curfews and other repressive measures of population control. It also established an intelligence gathering network amongst the population (*red de cooperantes*).⁶⁵ The main measures of the decree only remained active for a few months, as the Constitutional Court declared them illegal on the grounds that the military did not have police powers.⁶⁶ It was also indiscriminate, in that it allowed the military to round up ordinary citizens without proof of guerrilla contact.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the decree served to seriously destabilize the FARC. In the Montes de María in the Caribbean coast, for example, the draconian measures served to

⁶⁴See: Porch, 'Autonomy in Conflict', p.130.

⁶⁵ Ministerio del Interior de la Republica de Colombia, 'Decreto 2002 de Septiembre 9 de 2002 Por el cual se adoptan medidas para el control del orden público y se definen las zonas de rehabilitación y consolidación', Available at: <www.secretariasenado.gov.co/senado/basedoc/decreto/2002/decreto_2002_2002.html> (Accessed on 17 January 2014).

⁶⁶ 'Corte limita Zonas de Rehabilitación de Uribe', *El Tiempo*, 27 November 2002. Available at: www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-1322246. (Accessed on 17 January 2014).

⁶⁷ Ambassador William Wood to Department of State, 'Colombia's Debate over Mass Detentions', Confidential, Cable, 004214, 26April, 2004, Accessed via: Digital National Security Archive [DNSA].

set the context for the later military decimation of one of FARC's most accomplished fronts.⁶⁸

Martin Caballero, the leader of the 37th front, recounted in his log the effects the emergency measures had on his organization:

Total economic blockade in the urban centres, counties, roads and highways the 24 hours. They have prosecuted the majority of friends, sympathizers, collaborators and non-collaborators. Many didn't hold the pressure and ended up handing out information, and many have emigrated to other cities or to Venezuela, leaving us weakened and with no food. Nobody to deliver a pound of rice, the latter has generated an internal crisis where an ear of corn or a cow becomes military objective [...] we have spent weeks without tasting sugar, coffee, and we eat dry rice once a month. When things are good, one or two daily soups of corn, when yucca arrives we party [...] There are cadres that don't assume responsibility and units want to eat well, ignore security measures and are showered by enemy fire.⁶⁹

Given the demoralizing effects of the punitive measures the 'Zones of Consolidation' began to have on the insurgent structure, it is likely that Uribe would have been pleased to continue them, if not for the negative ruling of the Court. As he stated in his memoirs, he had, since the beginning of his term, 'decided to corral all the criminals and especially their leaders' and use the military to 'convince as many base guerrillas as possible to surrender their weapons'.⁷⁰ The expedited criminalisation of FARC insurgents and its supporting militias was a decisive first coup against the group. No wonder, that an initial hindrance to Uribe's stated goals was the court's ruling that giving police powers to the military was illegal.⁷¹

Appealing to the Prusso-German tradition, Uribe was at least rhetorically, willing to pursue the war against the insurgency to its logical military end – in other words the destruction of the FARC. The government aimed initially at cutting off the FARC from the main urban centres and regaining security in the most densely populated areas to push the insurgency back to its base area in the jungle. The job of the military was facilitated by the fact that Uribe effectively assumed his role of commander-in-chief and offered sufficient political will and

⁶⁸ Douglas Porch, 'The Hunt for Martín Caballero', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 35:2 (2012), pp.249-50.

⁶⁹ *Diario de Martín Caballero*, p.57. Document consulted courtesy of Colombian Navy, Regional Inteligencia Naval del Caribe (RINCA).

⁷⁰ Uribe, *No hay causa*, p.188.

⁷¹ See: 'Corte limita Zonas de Rehabilitación de Uribe,' *El Tiempo*, 27 November 2002.

resources for the execution of an offensive. As a US Military Group officer recalled in 2010: ‘Uribe was the only president who eventually realized that the FARC isn’t that competent. He kicked the military in the ass. It’s as if he said: “You’ve got popular backing, political support, and equipment – what are you waiting for?”’⁷² Another US observer, who witnessed Uribe’s draconian leadership style recounts in the following passage his relationship with the Colmil’s senior officers in the early days of his presidency:

President Uribe summoned his military commanders for what is known in military parlance as a ‘come to Jesus’ meeting, and told them in no uncertain terms that it was time to get out from behind their desks and into the field with their troops –where they belonged. In addition, the distractions of costly education and training junkets to the United States and elsewhere would henceforth be curtailed. He also admonished military commanders to do their jobs or resign. Commander of the Armed Forces General Jorge Enrique Moral Rangel underscored Uribe’s goals and stated that the new mission of the armed forces would be to ‘prevent, rather than react to the attacks by the guerrillas against the Colombian population and the regional and local government infrastructure.’⁷³

Two key operations at the beginning of Uribe’s presidency would set the tone of the military posture during the rest of his mandate, especially in terms of influencing the definition of success in the conflict in uncompromising terms. One was *Operación Orión* in October 2002, the other, *Operación Libertad 1* in the first half of 2003. *Orión* was entirely an urban operation that took place in Medellin. The objective was to regain control of the deprived *favela* like *Comuna 13*, where not only the FARC but also the Castroist *Ejercito de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) had gained ascendancy and competed for crime rackets with the paramilitaries and drug mafias. The first show of force in Medellin was important for Uribe as it was his own constituency, and given the legacy of severe insecurity in the city since the days of Pablo Escobar, any success in reducing the levels of violence could have an immediate political

⁷² Quoted in: Douglas Porch and Jorge Delgado, “‘Masters of Today’: military intelligence and counterinsurgency in Colombia, 1990-2010”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 21:2, June 2010, pp.277-302.

⁷³ Quoted in: Jennifer Taw, ‘Problems and Potential: The Role of the Police in the Colombian Insurgency,’ In Christine Fair and Ganguly, S (eds.), *Policing Insurgencies. Cops as Counterinsurgents* (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.152.

impact.⁷⁴ The operation was executed by the army's 4th Brigade, commanded by General Mario Montoya, an advocate of the military solution and the President's favourite, and who in 2006 was promoted to Army CoS. General Montoya would eventually push the military to a limit to deliver in the battlefield, with self-defeating effects.

Orión succeeded in eliminating the insurgents' hold over the city's periphery and effectively reduced the levels of violence. However, it did so at high cost. Recent judicial inquiries have found it was executed with extreme degrees of brutality, with excessive force, including extra-judicial killings and disappearances.⁷⁵ Also, there have been increasing allegations of collusion with paramilitary groups associated with the drug mafias, who after the operation signed a de facto non-aggression pact.⁷⁶ In fact, the claims of collusion also served to expedite the government's decision to force the demobilization of the allegedly 30,000 strong confederation of paramilitary groups, known as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). These groups were a growing liability for Uribe who was, and still is, accused of having links with them. The demobilization of the AUC, however, serves to illustrate how the Uribe administration viewed the end of the illegal armed groups, short of their defeat by force. The government could, in his view, engage in negotiations but where the only terms for discussion should be the conditions for the decommissioning of units and weapons, possible judicial concessions, but nothing with regards to the discussion of political rights or possible reforms to the *status-quo*.

⁷⁴ For an account of the operation Orion as well of the excesses committed by the authorities see: 'Operacion Orion: Una historia que cumple 13 años de impunidad,' El Tiempo, 19 October 2015. Available at: <<http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/medellin/13-anos-de-la-operacion-orion/16406579>>. Accessed: (19 October 2015).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ For an overview see: Human Rights Watch, *Breaking the Grip? Obstacles to Justice for Paramilitary Mafias in Colombia*, October 2008, pp.42-43.

<www.hrw.org/reports/2008/colombia1008/colombia1008webwcover.pdf> (Accessed on 20 January 2014).

For its part, *Operacion Libertad I* consisted in the saturation by four army brigades of the mountains that surround Bogotá, and where the FARC elite mobile units had gained since 1997 control of the corridors that from the capital lead to the south-eastern lowlands. The principal effort came from the deployment of the 4000 strong elite rapid deployment force (*Fuerza de Despliegue Rápido* - FUDRA) with its own air support assets to force the retreat of the insurgents back to the lowlands, bringing back a sense of security to the almost besieged capital. For the Colombian military, *Libertad I* would serve as a model for future military planning, looking to replicate its operational and tactical enhancements. Also, renewed US assistance, including the agreement to the use of counter-narcotic assets for offensive military action, served to shape the idea of a decisive campaign in the FARC's heartland.⁷⁷ The military success of *Operacion Libertad I* marked the promotion in November 2003 of its commander, General Reinaldo Castellanos, to Army CoS to replace General Carlos Alberto Ospina, who became Chief of the Armed Forces. These two 'Traditionalists' would use their immediate experiences in the planning and implementation of *Plan Patriota*, which was the military component of the government's DSP and which aimed to place the effort in the south eastern jungles with the elite FUDRA and the novel Joint Task Force 'Omega' as leading elements.

While the wording of the DSP made clear that the counter-insurgency campaign would be one of attrition, the expectations of *Plan Patriota* were extremely high. It foresaw that the saturation of the area and a high operational tempo would deliver decisive results before the end of Uribe's first term in 2006. However, after two years, FARC's infrastructure had sustained the worst that the government threw at them, including the loss of extensive numbers of crucial mid-ranking guerrillas, and the overall loss of 1/3 of its manpower. As Douglas Porch asserted at the time, it was clear that the Traditionalist's effort had 'soon passed Clausewitz

⁷⁷ Reinaldo Castellanos, 'Operación Libertad Uno: la política de seguridad democrática en acción', In Martínez, *Hablan los Generales*, pp.311-334.

culminating point of victory'.⁷⁸ But, to what extent did Uribe consider it was realistic to defeat FARC military during his first administration? Reminiscing about his presidency in 2012, he maintained that he had always believed that 'a classical "military victory" over such a big, strong and diffuse number of delinquents was not possible even if we trebled our forces.'⁷⁹ However, a closer look at his leadership during his tenure shows that he possessed had a clear determination to defeat FARC in what he calls in his memoirs 'classic' terms.

In December 2006, President Uribe authorised several operational changes to *Plan Patriota*, and committed additional resources and manpower to clear the territory. In the press release of the speech he gave on that occasion, he used the word 'victory' at least 9 times. Such was the emphasis on the word that it led to the unofficial denomination of the reformed scheme as *Plan Victoria*, in which he demanded his military commanders kill or capture the guerrilla leadership in order to succeed.⁸⁰ Indeed, from all the above, it can be argued that the President showcased a crude understanding of the meaning of success, reducing it to the decimation of the guerrilla ranks and the decapitation of the leadership. As Sergio Jaramillo, his former Vice-minister of Defence concluded: 'Uribe little understands the limits of military power, or the operational weakness of the army and the police, but instead strives for operational results that will translate into strategic success.'⁸¹

The pressure for obtaining 'visible' military successes grew higher with Uribe's re-election in 2006. The promotion of General Montoya to Army CoS seemed to be the right choice for the President, given his credentials as an aggressive and result-driven officer. However, after the initial advances of *Plan Patriota*, the insurgency anticipated the government's plan and responded by changing its methods -relying more on the use of

⁷⁸ Porch, 'Preserving Autonomy', p.145.

⁷⁹ Uribe, *No hay causa*, p.188.

⁸⁰ 'Derrota total de las FARC es el objetivo', *El Tiempo*, 10 December 2006.

⁸¹ Quoted in: Porch, 'Preserving Autonomy', p.145.

terrorism- operating in smaller and more elusive groups, and secreted in civilian clothes among the population. It no longer offered bloated, company-sized military units that offered pitched battle. Despite the changing strategic setting, Montoya's demand for operational results led him to view guerrilla kills as the most elemental metric of success. The pressure for results in terms of the destruction of the enemy had unexpected and calamitous effects, as it was source of what would become the most serious case of human rights violations committed by the Colmil in its history: the 'false positives' scandal. Several units began to engage in the unlawful practice of inflating their body counts. It is calculated that almost 4000 innocent civilians were murdered by rogue units of the Colmil between 2005 and 2008. Most of the victims were unemployed young men from deprived urban areas that were offered false work opportunities by undercover soldiers, who later murdered them and passed them off as 'neutralised' guerrillas.⁸² The level of pressure for operational results can be confirmed in the affidavit of a former field officer to the Inspector General, who handled the process. He affirms that a Brigade commander in 2006 declared that 'the war is being measured in litres of blood', and that consequently 'any commander who does not have results in kills per month will be sanctioned accordingly and that will reflect in his military record.' The denouncing officer also recalled a general directive from Army headquarters to battalion commanders that stated that 'no enemy casualties or battles in ninety days will cause the commander's expulsion from the Army for his negligence or operational failure'.⁸³

On the other hand, the pursuit for 'visible' military successes during Uribe's second term also included the promotion of new structures and capabilities. For his new Minister of

82 See: 'Colombia military murdered 3900 civilians to inflate effectiveness: Prosecution' *Colombia Reports*, 29 July 2013 < www.colombiareports.co/colombia-military-murdered-3900-civilians-to-inflate-success-public-prosecutors/?fb_ref=recommendations-bar > (Accessed 13 March 2014).

83 Quoted in: FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights, *Colombia. The war is measured in litres of blood*, (Brussels, June 2012), p.9 < www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapp_colombie_juin_2012_anglais_def.pdf > (Accessed 13 March 2014).

Defense, Juan Manuel Santos, success became a question of finding the right degree of resource optimisation. Moreover, as the US embassy in Bogotá related to the State Department ‘President Uribe regularly stressed to the Minister that the government only had forty-three months to achieve its goals’. Thus, the focus of the more technical-minded Santos was on acquiring means that could have an ‘immediate impact in the war against the insurgency’.⁸⁴ The strategic focus would remain the killing or capturing of High Value Targets (HVTs), especially the politico-military leaders of the 7 man Secretariat, but also mid-ranking Front and Company commanders to fracture command and control and foment enemy demoralisation. The strategic logic, of the Colombian MoD in this sense, was that the ability to decapitate the organization and strike the most inaccessible insurgent camps could accelerate the surrender of the FARC.

To introduce the new effort, Santos improved inter-service cooperation, and eventually shifted the weight of the offensive to the Air Force, Police Commandos and Army Special Forces. The negative backlash the ‘false positives’ case had on the Army’s legitimacy left the bulk of its regular units limited to area control operations. In this sense, the MoD pushed the military to adopt a Combatant Command Structure and centralized intelligence to further the action of the Joint Task Forces that became the muscle of the Colmil. Likewise, the Minister aimed at elevating the role of the Joint Special Operations Command which was inaugurated in 2007 with US assistance, and placed it under an Air Force General Officer who had significant means at his disposal in terms of actionable intelligence and air power.⁸⁵ In this respect, another key technical enhancement that Uribe highlights as ‘a breaking point in the fight against the terrorists,’ was no other than the ‘authorisation by the Bush government to sell

⁸⁴ ‘Ambassador discusses wealth tax, human rights with Defense Minister Santos’, Confidential Cable, 22 December 2006. Accessed via Wikileaks on 4 April 2013.

<http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BOGOTA11428_a.html> (Accessed 13 March 2014).

⁸⁵ An account of this recent process of modernisation of the Colmil can be found in: Juan Manuel Santos, *Jaque al Terror: Los años horribles de las FARC* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2009).

intelligent bombs to Colombia. GPS guided munitions, and other advanced guiding systems enabled to improve the precision of our attacks in great measure.’⁸⁶

In short, these newly acquired capabilities allowed Uribe to become the first president in Colombian history able to successfully strike the previously untouched FARC leadership. The scheme had its first success after the bombing of the insurgent deputy commander’s encampment in Ecuadorean territory in April 2008. And while during the rest of Uribe’s tenure no other FARC commanders were killed, the effectiveness of the bombing operations against insurgent base areas removed the enemy of their most able military commanders and escalated the numbers of personnel surrenders. However, the decisive results expected from the application of superior technical force, following the Prusso-German tradition, were not attained. The insurgent response to the campaign limited its impact as a method of sheer destruction of the enemy. It encouraged further atomisation of the surviving units which retreated deeper into the jungles and mountains, and forced the leaders to seek refuge in Venezuela. Although failing to defeat the FARC, Uribe left the Presidency having substantially reduced the levels of violence in the country as well as the threat the insurgency had posed to the survival of the state in the year 2002.

For its part, the strategic potential of the bombing offensive has been recognised by the current Santos administration. However, the modification of the uncompromising terms with which to measure success has allowed the current government to use of the strikes as a tool of coercive bargaining. A key factor of the bombing offensive at the outset was that it shattered what FARC scholars refer to as the insurgency’s ‘camp culture’, which since the 1960s has allowed them to support long periods without military confrontation and has become the essence of their collective, soviet lifestyle. Strategically, ‘camp culture’ also guaranteed them

⁸⁶ Uribe, *No hay causa*, p. 243.

command posts for the control of the peripheral population enclaves.⁸⁷ In this sense, precision bombing has been an effective tool to communicate to the insurgents that they are not safe anymore. Indeed, according to statistics of the MoD, between 2008 and 2011 alone, 7,650 guerrilla surrenders took place.⁸⁸ Following Schelling, it can be ascertained that the current administration has, thus, realized the value of its ‘power to hurt’ to influence the FARC’s latest decision to negotiate the end of the conflict.

From this perspective it can be argued that Santos helped advance a more refined political understanding of the utility of the military instrument and its limits as a tool of ‘vicious bargaining’⁸⁹ also visible in the way he has framed the ongoing peace negotiations with the FARC. President Santos’ decision to negotiate marked a rupture with the confidence that existed during Uribe’s administration that the military could simply be used to compel the FARC to accept terms of surrender. Via the lens of strategic theory, a possible explanation is that Santos understood that in the Colombian conflict, force has limitations and can only offer marginal military gains. Therefore, a negotiated settlement appears the most cost-effective means to solve it. He has also decided to sustain the military offensive while the negotiations take place, to communicate to the FARC that the will to continue the fight still exists, and hence, that the costs of continuing the armed insurgency will outweigh any conceivable benefits. In recognising the utility of the military instrument in these terms, he also sends a message to the Colmil, with a guarantee that negotiating does not mean relinquishing the contest of military strength. Santos has unambiguously stated that the sole reason why FARC has accepted to peace talks is because of the sustained military pressure.

⁸⁷ Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, *Guerras Inútiles*, p.136.

⁸⁸ Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, *Anuario estadístico del sector seguridad: 2003 -2009* (Bogotá: Imprenta nacional 2009), p. 145.

⁸⁹ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: YUP, 2008), p.33.

However, it is difficult for the President to shape positively the perceptions of the military, particularly of those close to the Prusso-German tradition with regards to the benefits of the peace process. Particularly, it is a contentious issue for the military that, to initiate the talks, Santos has not only offered FARC belligerent status but has agreed to negotiate with them over divisive political issues. The FARC has, exploited this point for its own benefit by arguing that these negotiations are between equal parties, and moreover that they are far from defeated despite a decade of consistent military pressure. As Pablo Catatumbo, one of FARC delegates in Havana has asserted: ‘the reason behind these dialogues, for the search of another solution to the conflict, is because there have been no victors or vanquished.’⁹⁰ That appears to be a gratuitous insult to the Colmil which believes it is on the cusp of victory against its most tenacious enemy.

The State-building narrative – grievance reduction as the solution to violence?

Having experienced a ‘conventional’ war in Asia, upon their return to Colombia the ‘Koreans’ insisted that the best approach to face the nascent communist insurgencies had to be fundamentally different. Before one could determine the value of force, one had first to define what the conflict was all about. In this sense, a main dilemma for the Colombians has traditionally been the reconciliation of the domestic notion of rule of law with the need to use the military instrument to greatest effect. Beyond the tendency to categorise conflicts as ‘irregular’, or ‘unconventional’ to argue in favour of the application of novel and ingenious methods,⁹¹ the Colmil is further challenged in defining the role of force in Colombia’s conflict by the common belief that internal security or public order missions, and in this latest period, counter-terrorism, cannot be considered as war *per se*.

⁹⁰ Alfredo Molano, ‘Las Farc dicen que no fueron a La Habana a entregar las armas’, *El Espectador*, 5 December 2013.

⁹¹ M.L.R. Smith, ‘Coin and the Chameleon’, p.36; Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths*, p.318.

Several politicians and officers of all grades in Colombia have considered the different insurgencies that have appeared in Colombia since World War II as the product of genuine socio-economic grievances. Hence, force has been considered to be of limited utility to solve the problem. This belief has pushed soldiers to advocate the need to acquire non-combat roles as a core military competence. President Betancur's first Minister of Defense, General Fernando Landazábal, who despite his strong militarist stance against the insurgency, as a Korea veteran, also ascribed to many of its precepts commented: 'the participation of the army in the restoration of public order breaks the limits of simple military action and expands, not only to indispensable collaboration, but also to the realization of government plans.'⁹² Undeniably, this line of thought was present in the debates surrounding the character of recent policy initiatives like *Plan Colombia* and later the Territorial Consolidation phase of Uribe's DSP since 2003.

In its early days, *Plan Colombia* was compared by President Andres Pastrana to a 'Marshall Plan for the coca growing regions of Putumayo and Caquetá', designed to remedy the economic and social ills that in his view were the root causes of violence and pushed the peasants into the drug trade. The assumption was that economic and infrastructure development would improve the lives of the peasantry and effectively inoculate them against guerrilla appeals.⁹³ In a monograph of the US Army War College, the foremost representative of the Korean tradition, retired General Alvaro Valencia Tovar wrote that *Plan Colombia* was a valuable tool for the ends of 'enlightened government'. In his opinion, social ills were exploited by the guerrilla to entice tens of thousands of *campesinos* into the drug trade. To persuade them to return to a traditional but improved life would require a significant national development programme in

⁹² Fernando Landazábal, *El Desafío. Colombia: Sus problemas y Soluciones* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1988), p.45.

⁹³ 'DMAIII--Pastrana Breakfast and Colombia Bilateral', Confidential Cable, 22December 1998, Accessed via: DNSA.

which the military would play a pivotal role to ensure success and reassert the state's legitimacy.⁹⁴

However, in the end, the assumptions that prevailed in the configuration of *Plan Colombia* were different to the state-building rhetoric. The plan came to view counter-narcotics as a security problem rather than a question of economic and social progress. This resulted in 70 per cent of the appropriations of the programme going to military and security activities, according to the US Government Accountability office.⁹⁵ The economic and social development component of the programme was overshadowed by the assumption that the centre of gravity of the conflict was to be found in the forceful disruption of the estimated US\$6.5billion represented in the cocaine trade. The end of US policy was not the reduction of grievances, following the Korean tradition, nor the disruption of the military muscle of FARC as understood by the 'Traditionalists'. This was made evident in *Plan Colombia's* concept of operations, which explained: 'The immense profits generated by the drug trade continue to fuel lawless, corruption and internal conflict.'⁹⁶ This analysis of the situation, required the US to 'support Colombia to reduce the production, processing and distribution of illicit drugs,' through 'training, procurement, and distribution of equipment, and the design and building of infrastructure to enhance Colombian counter-narcotics capabilities.' SOUTHCOM's concept concluded that the US 'will not support Colombian counter-insurgency efforts. We will however provide support for security directly related to counter-narcotics efforts.'⁹⁷

Did the Colmil really believe that the solution to the conflict resided in the effective management of the drug problem? Whilst representatives of both traditions may have had

⁹⁴ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, 'A view from Bogotá', in Gabriel Marcella (ed.) *PLAN COLOMBIA: Some Differing Perspectives*, (Carlisle Barracks PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), pp.23-24.

⁹⁵ See: Government Accountability Office, *PLAN COLOMBIA: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved*. GAO-09-71, (October 2008).

⁹⁶ 'USSOUTHCOM Operation Order for Plan Colombia', Secret Cable, Excised Copy, 5 December 2000. Accessed via DNSA.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

misgivings about the main strategic assumptions of the plan and how it misconstrued the centre of gravity of the conflict, they showcased a more pragmatic approach toward the aid package. This was particularly the case for the 'Traditionalists'. Ultimately, the Plan became a main source of funding for a much needed process of modernisation that led to the acquisition of essential capabilities in terms of organization, air mobility, intelligence, and firepower and personnel professionalization. Despite the fact that the concept posed serious challenges to commanders, who could not use American sponsored capabilities directly against the FARC, the qualitative improvement in joint operations and the possibility of integration of various combat units, which for Colombian commanders was novel, convinced the most traditionalist elements about the benefits of the aid. For example, the Plan sponsored the creation of Joint Task Force South (JTF-S), composed of three Brigades and an Intelligence battalion, which served as a model for future force structure reforms, and the introduction of units like the rapid deployment force (FUDRA) and JTF Omega, which would combine mobility, special forces and air assets to pack a punch against the FARC during the Uribe government. Curiously, the first commander of JTF-S was General Mario Montoya. While the General was praised by the US for going after drug production at its source, destroying coca fields, chemical precursor sites and laboratories, he was eager to use his units to provide security by going after the insurgents.⁹⁸ For 'Traditionalists', like him, the situation would drastically change with 9/11. After that date the 'artificial distinction between counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency,'⁹⁹ as former US Drug Czar, General Barry McCaffrey, called it, was lifted and Washington began to allow the government in Bogotá to use the military assets of *Plan Colombia* to target the FARC.

⁹⁸ US Embassy to DoS, 'Putumayo Operations: CD Battalion continues Operations', Confidential Cable, Excised Copy, Forwarded Copy 001439, 15 February 2001. Accessed via DNSA.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Jason Vauters and MLR. Smith, 'A Question of Escalation - From Counternarcotics to Counterterrorism: Analysing US Strategy in Colombia', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 17:2 (June 2006), p.171.

A key point about the drug trade is that it not only escalated the conflict from the 1980s, it also confused the discussion over its causes and the most effective way to handle it. In opposition to the ‘legitimate grievances’ school of thought favoured by the ‘Koreans’, the view that violence caused Colombian social ills, and not vice versa, gathered momentum from the late 1990s. The conclusion was that Colombia had a security problem, not an economic or social one. This understanding, as Porch maintains, underpinned Uribe’s approach to the conflict, under the belief that the ending of violence via military means would fix the social problem, as it would establish the basis for economic development.¹⁰⁰ However, for planners in the president’s cabinet at the outset of his administration in 2002, it became clear that the counter-insurgency policy would require some sort of stabilization and reconstruction programmes to fill the governance vacuum left by the retreat of the FARC once the military effort advanced, reviving ideas of the ‘Korean’ tradition.

Indeed, the state-building narrative was an important theme for one of the key drafters of the DSP, MoD advisor and later vice-minister, Sergio Jaramillo, a senior civil servant who had studied philology and classical languages at Oxford, Cambridge and Heidelberg and who was familiar with the works of Sir Robert Thompson. Following COIN theory, Jaramillo opted for the classic ‘oil spot’ approach. He instituted the Malayan Emergency ‘traffic-light system’ which defined the status of the areas to be pacified: insurgent-dominated red areas, yellow areas in transition, and green in stabilised areas.¹⁰¹ He also established a division of labour between the military and the police.¹⁰² One feature of Jaramillo’s territorial control approach was to assuage grievances in the recovered areas by providing previously non-existent services in the less populated periphery where FARC thrived. In short, Jaramillo believed that Colombia’s

¹⁰⁰Porch, ‘Preserving Autonomy’, p.133.

¹⁰¹ Delgado, ‘Counterinsurgency’, p.413.

¹⁰²Presidencia de la República de Colombia, *Política de Defensa Defensa y Seguridad Democrática*, (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2003), p.17.

security problems stemmed directly from the historical absence of effective government in peripheral areas which the DSP and its territorial control effort known as *Consolidación* (Consolidation) aimed to supply.¹⁰³ ‘More than facing an enemy’, he explained, ‘what you are actually doing is trying to re-establish the rule of law. You want to win the battle of governance; you want to show that you are the legitimate authority.’¹⁰⁴ So, in short, five years before the rise to orthodoxy of COIN doctrine’s tactical concepts in Iraq, Colombian officials were already framing the campaign against the FARC according to COIN’s basic tenets. At the time, US Embassy officials in Bogotá declared the DSP to be a promising step forward that clearly ‘proposed a “clear-hold strategy” with the Colombian FUDRA (Rapid Reaction Forces) as the leading element.’ This, they argued, demonstrated that ‘Uribe’s team and the GOC [had] experience with strategic thought and organization [...] much in common with USG thinking.’¹⁰⁵

In this respect, the goal of the DSP consolidation effort was to effectively compete with the FARC in critical zones, to showcase the government as a better alternative in terms of the supply of basic goods and services. On the face of it, the underpinning of the policy was nothing more than the 1960s population-centric COIN mantra favoured by the ‘Koreans’, revamped with the latest inter-agency international ‘best practices’. It placed the onus on the military to make contact with a periphery, where it was the only institution to have some rapport with the population apart from the drug mafias, FARC and certain missionary orders of the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Delgado, ‘Counterinsurgency’, p.413.

¹⁰⁴ Tony Pfanner et.al, ‘Interview with Sergio Jaramillo Caro’, *International Review of the Red Cross* 90:872 (December 2008), p. 825.

¹⁰⁵ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Developing a Colombian National Security Strategy’, Unclassified Cable, 4 July 2002. Accessed via DNSA.

¹⁰⁶ For a study of the lack of state presence in Colombia’s southeastern jungles and the history of ‘colonisation’ by the church and later by drug mafias see: Jaime Eduardo Jaramillo et.al. *Colonización, coca y Guerrilla* (Bogotá: Alianza Editorial, 1989). The influence of the theme of ‘colonisation’ in Colmilitar mentality will be analysed in the next chapter.

However, the state-building approach of Uribe faced strong challenges, in particular in *La Macarena* area between the departments of Meta and Caquetá in south-east Colombia. With an area of 11,300 km² and almost 50,000 inhabitants, *La Macarena* has been, since the late 1960s, the most important FARC strong-hold where 30 per cent of the population derives its livelihoods from the coca trade and admits ties with the insurgency. The financial and physical protection coca-growing peasants receive from FARC make them resistant to the basic ‘hearts and minds’ discourse of the state.¹⁰⁷ Particularly, because the region’s remoteness from national and international markets and the lack of alternative lucrative crops that could offer significant profit, have created dependency on FARC that market their produce. *La Macarena* is also a difficult candidate for state reclamation given the fact that the consolidation programme - financed heavily by international donors, and in particular by USAID – takes the form of a basic welfare scheme which puts its sustainability at risk.¹⁰⁸ Finally, the improvement in security in the most densely populated areas of the country has led politicians to reduce the relative importance of investing in the periphery, despite the argument of the followers of the ‘Korean’ tradition that only by stabilising it and dealing with the local grievances there is the only way to solve the root causes of the conflict. But why would politicians concern themselves with prioritizing public resources for isolated areas while they have to focus on the needs of their constituencies in the growing urban areas? Moreover, the political will to continue with state-building has faded with the advance of the offensive against the FARC, especially given the effect of the targeted killing programme which has reduced the insurgents’ capability to operate at large, and which has been considered to be a more cost-effective means to improve security.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Delgado, ‘Counterinsurgency’, pp.415-417.

¹⁰⁸ Peter De Schazo et.al., *Colombia’s Plan de Consolidacion Integral de la Macarena: An Assesment* (Washington DC: CSIS, June 2009) Available at: http://csis.org/files/publication/090602_DeShazo_PCIM_Web.pdf. (Accessed 14 November 2014).

¹⁰⁹ Priest, ‘Covert Action in Colombia’, *The Washington Post*, 21 December 2013.

Ultimately, the limits of state-building efforts in the peripheral areas where there is an historic insurgent presence have been in some way recognised by the Santos government as a reason for initiating peace negotiations with FARC in Havana since 2012. The President has named the steward of *Consolidación*, former vice-minister Jaramillo as one of his chief negotiators with FARC. In a conference at Harvard University in March 2014, Jaramillo explained that success in the peace process will allow the government to engage in state-building by other means rather than COIN:

In essence [the peace process] is about putting in place a new and inclusive model for building and strengthening the Institutions in the regions. The Colombian State has attempted all sorts of programmes to bring development to the remote regions. Without denying their successes, I believe the centralist model, in which civil servants land like Martians among the communities to “bring the State”, ran out of steam. I have made part of those efforts and I know their merits and limitations. And, I am convinced that in that way the State will “arrive” nowhere in a sustained fashion and with sufficient strength.¹¹⁰

In essence, the Santos administration is attempt to convince the FARC to demobilise and enter the political process offers a blunt recognition that the insurgency is a valid political actor with legitimacy and leverage. The reasoning, then, is that in the state-building challenge there are environments in which the technocratic COIN ‘government-in-a-box’ approach exhibits limitations. The solution lately is to attempt to solve the socio-economic grievances by cooperating, instead of competing, with the FARC to achieve what Jaramillo has termed ‘territorial peace’¹¹¹. This is the case with two of the six points that comprise the peace agenda, and to which both parties have signed up in the past year. For example, agreeing on issues of rural development and political rights, the government has agreed to allow a disarmed FARC to work in its constituencies through the promotion of ‘peasant reservation zones’ to come up

¹¹⁰ Sergio Jaramillo, ‘No va haber otra oportunidad para la paz’, *El Tiempo*, 6 April 2014, Available at: <www.eltiempo.com/politica/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW_NOTA_INTERIOR-13791996.html> (Accessed 11 May 2015).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

with alternatives to the drug trade and to facilitate the process of manual eradication of coca leafs.¹¹²

It is not possible at present to answer with full certainty how the Colmil will assimilate the agreements the government has reached with the insurgency up to now, not only from the perspective of the Prusso-German tradition but also from those close to the ‘Korean’ tradition. Whilst the latter recognises that the grievance reduction discourse is valid, that does not necessarily mean they agree these social issues should be dealt with in cooperation with the adversary. Rather, for the ‘Koreans’ it should be the state through its formal institutions the sole responsible actor in the management of those social issues in order to consolidate its legitimacy and ultimately solve the conflict. From this perspective, to grant to the FARC that social grievances exist and accord to work together in its resolution has been considered by some officers as a self-defeatist act.¹¹³ Given the legacy of frustration that has existed in the Korean tradition with regard to the politician’s historic reluctance to see through a state-building endeavour, it is possible that the peace process, no matter its outcome, will continue to stir up the general ‘stab-in-the back’ notion that has agitated civil-military relations in Colombia since the 1960s.

Conclusion: An absence of strategic consensus in Colmil thinking?

Historically, the lack of consensus about the nature of the conflict, about the role the military should play and what it is intended to achieve, lead to the configuration of a ‘stab in the back’ notion that has stymied the process of strategic formulation in Colombia. ‘Traditionalists’ have considered the civilian leadership to lack the will to pursue the fight to its logical military end and compel the enemy by force, and have accused them of allowing themselves to be

¹¹² See: ‘First Joint Report of the dialogue table between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army, FARC,’ (21 June 2013).

¹¹³ Fernando Landazábal, *El Precio de la Paz*, (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1985), p.280.

intimidated into starting peace talks by the FARC.¹¹⁴ ‘Koreans’, for their part, also have disregarded the politicians as negligent, unwilling to address the social causes of the conflict via effective state-building. As General Landazábal stated, perhaps simplistically, ‘It is not that the army has not been able to win; it is that the political class has not been able to govern.’¹¹⁵ The subsequent chapters of the thesis endeavour to explain in depth how this mentality evolved since *La Violencia* and assess its influence in Colmil strategic thinking.

To a certain extent, as this chapter has argued, President Uribe’s leadership temporarily soothed these historical frustrations, because his style and rhetoric appealed to both martial traditions. On the one hand, he successfully took on the role of commander-in-chief and pushed the military to deliver in the battlefield as part of his DSP, while on the other, the promotion of state-building to fill the governance vacuum left by the retreat of the FARC echoed the desires of the ‘Korean’ narrative. But despite the fact that during the first decade of the 21st century a greater assertion of political control over the military instrument and increased civil-military dialogue, which reduced the Colmil’s operational autonomy, this did not translate into a strategic consensus over the ends to be sought. This chronic problem in Colombian military thinking, reminds us of Clausewitz , who stated that ‘No one starts a war -or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is political purpose; the latter is its operational objective.’¹¹⁶

To analyse the origin and evolution of the problems at level of strategic formulation in the country in a systematic fashion it is first necessary to chart the themes that configure the Colombian military’s value system. This is the aim of the following chapter, which intends to

¹¹⁴ Ronderos, ‘Harold Bedoya,’ *El Tiempo*, 10 May 1998.

¹¹⁵ Landazábal, *El Desafío*, p.45.

¹¹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p.700.

dissect the main features that underpin the strategic tradition of the Colmil and identify those factors that have influenced its distinct understandings of the conflict and of the use of force.

CHAPTER II

THE BASIS OF THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY'S STRATEGIC TRADITION

The oscillatory nature of the Comil's judgement about the character of the conflict and the instrumentality of the armed instrument, discussed in the previous chapter, is a defining feature of the evolution of its thinking. These tensions are important for the purpose of this chapter in particular as it will endeavour to construct the underpinnings of the strategic tradition of the Colombian military. It aims at discerning the factors that underpin the motivational patterns and assumptions that have influenced, throughout the years, the oscillatory thinking of the armed forces. In other words, this chapter will analyse the foundations of the value-system that has determined the Colmil's strategic thinking process. This process has had a bearing on the definition of the military's goals, on the views about the means to achieve them, and consequently, on the judgements about the utility of force in the conflict.¹

The essential aspects of the oscillations in Colombian military thinking, as they reveal themselves at the surface, can be presented schematically as Figure 2 depicts. On the one hand, there were those soldiers who came to believe the defeat of the insurgencies could be carried out solely by military means. For them 'war is war', and that is what Colombia was, and still is, facing. Thus, the effective use of the armed instrument that is operationally proficient and technically superior can lead to the culmination of tactical successes, ultimately serving the war's object. This is a view that is still visible in the military mind, as in the words of the Chief of the Armed Forces between 2010 and 2013, General Alejandro Navas: 'to achieve peace war has to be won, and war is won in the battlefield after breaking the enemy's will to

¹ The use of the concept value-system in this precise form comes from Peter Neumann's work on the strategic tradition of the British government in Northern Ireland. See Peter Neumann, *Britain's Long War: British Strategy in the Northern Ireland Conflict, 1969-98* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). p.17.

fight.’²General Navas, who very probably read his Clausewitz, knows that ‘victory normally results from the superiority of one side; from a greater aggregate of physical and psychological strength’ to defeat the enemy.³ However, the Prussian philosopher also made it clear that wars are never so straightforward. This explains why in war military prowess, conjoined with superior technical abilities and manpower do not necessarily guarantee the attainment of the political object, a point which another part of the Colombian military would seem to agree with.

Figure 2: Oscillations in Colombian Military Thinking



² ‘General Navas dice que la paz se obtiene ganando la guerra’, *El Tiempo*, 22 August 2012.

³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p.632.

Some Colombian senior officers, past and present, would retort to General Navas that the ‘destruction of the enemy is not the only means to obtain the political object’, as war can be waged for other objectives,⁴ which, in their opinion, may not be achieved through the sole application of force. Indeed, some soldiers have seen the conflict as more than a war, and thus consider that armed force has its limits.⁵ An assertion that gained prominence from the 1960s, with the view that counter-insurgency amounted to a separate category of war, lead soldiers to argue that the military must extend its’ scope of action and consider other tools beyond the use of force.’⁶ The main implication of that reason was that the armed instrument should be just one of the means in a holistic state-building effort.

To examine the influences that have shaped these varied judgements, views and behaviour of the Colombian military, a key step is to construct its strategic tradition. In essence, evaluating how the value-system of an actor influences its decision-making process is one of the prime elements of strategic analysis. It was Clausewitz who noted that, ‘absolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in military calculations’, but rather that, ‘war deals with living and moral factors’, thus never being absolute or certain.⁷ In this sense, as Schelling indicated, strategic analysis can be divided into two lines: the study of just the calculative, more rational and conscious side of an actors’ behaviour, or, a focus on all of its complexity, including the conscious rational calculations, as well as the unconscious and motivational aspects that shape his behaviour.⁸ Acknowledging this latter aspect implies that the actor’s motivational core is essential in the configuration of his image of reality, and moves him

⁴ Ibid. p.109.

⁵ See for example Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, esp.ch 17, pp.397-420.

⁶ Ibid., p.423.

⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p.97.

⁸ Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, p.7.

towards the definition of ends, hence influencing the way he selects the means for achieving them.⁹

With this in mind, the following chapter will aim to disentangle some key themes that have configured the value-system of the Colombian military and have been significant in the development of its strategic tradition. The themes that have been selected do not represent an exact and complete picture of the assumptions and motivations that have influenced military thought in the country. In no way can they be considered exclusive factors. They are simply interpretative tools which aid in understanding the complexity of the subject of study and take into account the uniqueness of the historical and political context in which it evolved. The themes can be listed under five headings, as follows: the question of military autonomy and the relationship to the civilian government; the military's analysis of the nature and causes of the conflict; the concepts of colonisation and state-building in the military's tradition; the impact of Catholicism in shaping the notion of a civilising mission and a rationalist framework of analysis; and finally, the characterisation by the military of the relationship with the United States.

Military Autonomy versus Political Control

A guiding theme of civil-military relations in Colombia since the end of *La Violencia* had been the explicit acceptance by politicians and soldiers that the military had the right to maintain an autonomous sphere free of political interference. In practice, such autonomy meant that Colombian governments washed their hands of the management of the internal conflict and delegated the task to the military. It was only in August 2002, when a 20,000 strong FARC army threatened the survival of the Colombian state that the longstanding civil-military

⁹ Smith, *Fighting for Ireland?*, p.11.

contract was broken by President Uribe, who attempted to assume effective political control over the military as a tool in a planned state action against the insurgency.

The autonomy of the Colombian military was officially recognised in 1958, right after the end of the short-lived dictatorship of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. The first government of the National Front sought to secure the de-politicisation of the armed forces as a guarantee of a swift transition to civilian rule. To achieve it, Liberal President Alberto Lleras Camargo, in a speech to the General Staff in Bogotá, conceded institutional autonomy to the military in return for political neutrality. In his speech, he set the parameters of what would from then on become a dogma in the relations of the military and the politicians: the 'Lleras Doctrine.' The President insisted that the Colombian military should not be a 'deliberative body', but that it should rather be an apolitical force concerned only with the technical aspects of the profession. 'Politics is the art of controversy *par excellence*, the military that of discipline,' he proclaimed. The reward for non-intervention in the political debate was the promise by the government that 'politicians will not decide in any manner how to manage the Armed Forces, in its technical functions, in its regulations, its personnel.'¹⁰ Evidently, such a statement was set against the background of Samuel Huntington's model of civil-military relations, and its chief assertion that high levels of military professionalism, were conducive to political subordination and apolitical attitudes.¹¹

In practical terms, President Lleras Camargo's statement of principles served its main purpose as it assured a safe passage to civilian rule, and additionally, also served to neutralise the bipartisan nature of *La Violencia* by removing the military from the confrontation between the parties. Henceforth, Liberals could rest assured a Conservative government would not use

¹⁰ Alberto Lleras Camargo, *El primer gobierno del Frente Nacional*, (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1959), pp. 211-214.

¹¹ Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* was first published in 1957, and his assertions on 'objective civilian control' were highly influential amidst the challenges for democracies in the first decades of the Cold War for sustaining large military establishments during peace time. But as Hew Strachan states, the effect of Huntington's work 'was to elevate a norm over reality'. For more on the influence of Huntington's ideas see Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.77.

the military against them again. Likewise, the arrangement offered an extra guarantee to the liberal guerrillas and communist self-defence forces to demobilise under the government's offers of amnesty, by removing any justification for the resort to armed force.¹² Nonetheless, the political circumstances, which had given rise to the doctrine, soon changed. The military was not confined to the barracks to theorise about 'conventional war,' the defence of national sovereignty and the preparation for international operations like Korea or Suez, something many officers would have desired, viewing it as their professional niche. Instead the military was brought in again by the politicians to deal with the persistent problem of banditry, generated by groups that refused to demobilise, and face the fears of expanding communist insurgency inspired by the success of the Cuban revolution.¹³

The 'Lleras Doctrine' was to remain in place for more than four decades, and, its permanence gave rise to weak political guidance of a military that had by constitutional mandate, being tasked to deal with the conflict. Nevertheless, from the 1960s, some periods saw an effective synchronisation between government aims and military objectives, and smooth relations between the Colmil leadership and the politicians. In fact, as will be discussed in Chapter 4 that was exactly the case with President Lleras Camargo and his chiefs of staff, which facilitated the adaptation of the military instrument to adopt counter-insurgency as sponsored by the Kennedy administration. However, the change in political priorities, based on the dynamics of the internal conflict by the end of the decade, including the proliferation of new smaller insurgencies like the M-19, and the change in behaviour of the two main ones (the FARC and the ELN) which moved to a defensive phase; meant at times that the politicians came to view the insurgency problem merely as a security nuisance. If the insurgencies were not more than a mere challenge for law and order that did not threaten the survival of the

¹² Palacios, *Legitimacy and Violence*, pp.153-147.

¹³ Ibid.

political order, civilian leaders had no reservations in delegating the management of public order to the military. Nonetheless, as commentators have pointed out, the problematic aspect of delegating the mission to the military under the parameters of the civil-military arrangement and its precept of military autonomy was that the design and coordination of policy for handling the insurgency problem was to become excessively militarised.¹⁴ The lack of political guidance would also be problematic as the Colmil would harbour a different appreciation of the insurgent threat, which in its opinion when minimised by the politicians served the different insurgent groups own revolutionary agenda whilst impeding the application of efficient measures to counter them.

Indeed, in the long run, *misiones de orden público* (public order missions) as the autonomous sphere of the military, under the tenets of the ‘Lleras Doctrine’ turned into a politics-free space. This meant that soldiers were, at least on paper, to be left alone in a vacuum, to act in accordance to their professional knowledge, to control and manipulate the armed instrument in order to compel the illegal groups to their will. The problem with this notion, is that it produced a strategic disconnect separating the political dimension of the conflict from the operational level.

Viewing Colombia’s political instability as a question to be addressed through military-technique left an indelible imprint on its strategic tradition, particularly on those officers, associated to the ‘Prusso-German’ school, who became overzealous about the utility of armed force. Moreover, some of them have argued that the concept of public order was nothing more than a euphemism for war.¹⁵ As it can be seen schematically in Figure 2, part of the Colombian military associated to the ‘Prusso-German’ school, has tended to believe that the country is at war. The war has throughout the years with different terms like ‘revolutionary war’; ‘irregular

¹⁴ Francisco Leal Buitrago, *El Oficio*, pp. 5-6; see also: Porch, ‘Preserving autonomy in Conflict’, p.130.

¹⁵ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.200.

war'; 'anti-subversive war'; 'low-intensity war' or even 'drug war', but nonetheless for this section of the Colmil it is the same phenomenon.¹⁶ Hence, it can be argued that this section of the Colmil has considered feasible to use force as the principal means to defeat the nation's internal enemies, and found space to push their views, especially during periods of escalating violence. The natural reflex of these soldiers has been to employ the military instrument in a way that brings maximum force against identifiable targets. But as they are aware, insurgents normally do not offer pitched battle, rather resort to hit and run tactics, and to survive hide amongst, and, utilise the population to fight the government. In that context, it is not surprising that against such an 'illegitimate' and 'cowardly' enemy the Colmil have demanded to act unconstrained by *jus ad bellum*.¹⁷

In this context, poor political guidance, it can be argued, impacted negatively the formulation of strategy because it complicated the establishment of clear, attainable, goals and consequently left the military unhindered to give shape its objectives and the level of the effort required to achieve them. This deficiency, according to Douglas Porch, led to a dogma of armed force as the means to achieve an elusive victory.¹⁸ No wonder, that with the armed instrument going unchecked, the conflict has at times taken the form of what Michael Howard calls *bellum Romanum* or *guerre mortelle*, where armed force has been used unrestrained.¹⁹ The resort to an excessive and indiscriminate use of force was extremely common during the early *Violencia*, as will be analysed in Chapter 3, when it was justified under the idea that the Liberal guerrillas and their collaborators were enemies that had to be exterminated. More recently, the resort to a no-holds-barred approach was particularly the case since the mid-1970s, in response to the

¹⁶ Porch, 'Preserving autonomy', p.130.

¹⁷ See for example the demands of General Luis Pineda in 1996 amidst the beginning of the offensive of the FARC when he sustained that Colombia was facing an 'undeclared civil war': 'Our legal framework is for a situation of peace, when the truth is that we are at war, and to fight it, we need legislation for war that offers the military forces the instruments to act.' Quoted in 'Hay Guerra civil no declarada', *El Tiempo*, 9 September 1996.

¹⁸ Porch, 'Preserving autonomy', p.145.

¹⁹ Michael Howard, *War in European History*, (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 5-7.

escalation of violence by the ELN and the M-19's urban campaigns, which included the widespread use of terrorist tactics to attempt to generate a major political instability and push the government to a negotiating table.²⁰

When the conflict against the myriad insurgent groups escalated since *La Violencia*, various governments had to recognise that the perturbation of public order was such that it was necessary to establish 'states of emergency'. In such contexts, politicians have offered the military special powers – including judicial competences, reduced their accountability and pressed them to obtain results. Such powers allowed the military to obtain tactical successes against the majority of groups reducing their capabilities to operate. But reduction in violence levels normally meant a swift end to the states of legal exception, and with a recovered sense of 'normalcy,' some politicians, like Alfonso Lopez in 1974, President Belisario Betancur in 1982 or Virgilio Barco in 1988, have called for the opening of negotiations with the insurgencies to solve the conflict and attempt to incorporate them into the political process. Such decisions to remove the powers originally given to the military by 'states of emergency' or ordering 'cease-fires' as preludes to negotiations, rather than sustaining an offensive against the insurgents have shaped the notion in sections of the Colmil that politicians obstruct their work.²¹ Not surprisingly, Generals in press and books as well as associations of veterans have publicly denounced that politicians have favoured partisan or personal agendas instead of a national commitment to defeat the insurgents, and that in that manner they have intervened in the military's autonomous operational sphere breaking the 'Lleras Doctrine.'²² In this respect, one can summarise, that the escalation of violence by the insurgents has deeply altered many officers of the Colmil, who have believed the politicians instead of committing to counter the

²⁰ The reasons for, and consequences of, the Colmil's lack of restraints of since the 1970s will be discussed in a later subsection of this chapter (Catholicism and the Civilising mission).

²¹ Landazábal, *El Precio de la Paz*, pp.256 -257.

²² Ibid., See also: Lora, 'Aspectos Psicológicos,' pp.32-33.

threat by supporting them with the means and will to do so, fall to the adversary's trap of starting peace talks.

As discussed in the previous chapter, since the experience with the first joint peace process with the FARC and the M-19 in 1982, talks have been considered by the Colmil merely as a feature of the communist insurgencies strategies, to be used to regain strength and mobilise the non-violent political aspects of their struggle. In this sense, soldiers have been overly sensitive with the lack political resolve to push for verifiable cease-fires or to force weapon decommissioning, as well as with the lenience in the offering amnesties for captured guerrilla personnel. In short the Colmil has considered these sort of political concessions only serve the insurgencies end goals. The antipathies towards the politicians in this respect in the strategic tradition of the military were spelled out in 1982 by then Minister of Defence, General Fernando Landazábal:

In an eloquent recognition of her inefficiency, the political class lures the subversives with offers of amnesty, and that is why she plays willingly with the State of Siege. It is her who declares it, in the first place, when the situation threatens to get out of control, and offers the armed establishment better possibilities to stop and combat those who have taken arms against her. She [the political class] is the one, who in a given moment, suspends the state of emergency, makes the civil courts decide about the fortune of those already captured and court martialled, allowing them to reincorporate to the subversion, mocking the military tribunals and disowning the results of operations in which soldiers and police have lost their lives [...] The military victories obtained by the armed forces are numerous and decisive. It was precisely the conviction of the subversion of their impossibility of obtaining victory in the battlefield that moved it to consider talks as the more promising means to approach power, uncovering the responsibility of the political class that accepted the talks.²³

Another problem brought about by the operational autonomy of the military in the conduct of the so called 'public order mission', is that there has been no clear definition of what are its limits. For example, US Army General John R. Galvin -who as a Captain in the mid-1950s served as one of the first advisers to the Colombian Lanceros school (the equivalent to the US Ranger school) and experienced the first counter-insurgency campaigns of the Colmil, explained in his memoirs:

²³ Fernando Landazábal, *El Precio de la Paz*, pp.256 -257.

The military campaign to suppress La Violencia was then called “Orden Publico.” The six brigades of the army were spread across the country with enormous but vague mission of keeping public order – seeing to it that the local government was able to function, roads were open, and business were uninterrupted. We referred to the guerrillas as *bandoleros* –bandits who took advantage of a weak governmental structure and a tepid economy. We wondered if there was an atmosphere of lawlessness that supported violence.²⁴

In this context, the definition of the Colmil role in the conduct of ‘public order’ became a predicament for many officers associated with the Korean school of thought, who supported the view that Colombia’s conflict is more than a war, and so, have made an alternative judgment about the utility of force as it can be seen in Figure 2. For many soldiers, ‘public order’ was not a clear political goal to be achieved by efficient military technique, and hence, considered the use of force as an insufficient means to deal with the Colombian conflict. One of these officers was General Álvaro Valencia Tovar, Army CoS in the early 1970s, who believed the military since the 1950s had simply began to assume a repressive function with regard to public order missions, under an ingrained belief that rural rebellion and political subversion could only be dealt with by force. Accordingly, officers following his line of thought argued that the military was not analysing the character of the conflict in which it was finding itself involved and was thus unable to define a more adequate approach in line with the uniqueness of the Colombian context and the socio-economic conditions in which it was rooted. Arguments like those pressed by Valencia Tovar, particularly during the ascendancy of population-centric counter-insurgency theory since the early 1960s promoted the view that the Colmil should focus its action on applying different means apart from reliance on force alone.

Moreover, given the vagueness of the ‘public order mission’, Colombian officers close to the ‘Korean’ school were resentful of the lack of political direction in the conflict. Valencia Tovar, for example, with a touch of sarcasm, expressed the feeling that the government had not been serious enough in shaping policy to tackle endemic violence: ‘This is a country of four-

²⁴ John R. Galvin, *Fighting the Cold War. A soldier’s memoir* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2015), p.74.

year terms: every President intends to break with the past; he comes in to wallow the country with his scheme for salvation; he designs new policies, if that is how improvisations can be called. [...] In part, the absence of policy has been replaced by the military establishment.²⁵ The obvious conclusion drawn by these officers has been that political negligence has demanded that they fill the strategic gap and shape policy themselves to address the root causes of the conflict. This notion was put forward by General Landazábal in the early 1980s:

[...] it is the military, given the knowledge they have of the country and its internal situation, the one who has proposed to the government the plans that need to be applied for re-establishing public order. If that collaboration is seen with resentful eyes by the political establishment; and they let themselves be pulled by jealousy to settle rivalries with the defenders of their realm, the conflict is prolonged for years and years and the growth of subversion is incentivised.²⁶

Inevitably, such interpretation of the character of the conflict invited a high degree of involvement in the political process, principally through the assumption of a clear-cut position with regard to its role in the formulation and execution of state-building policy. RAND analyst Richard Maullin, who observed the Colombian case in the early 1970s, summed up this situation by noting that as soon as ‘national political conflict is militarised, the professionalisation of the armed forces helps promote its involvement in partisan political matters, the requirements for mobilising the resources of the state against its internal enemies thrust the armed forces to the centre of policy making.’²⁷ Military autonomy combined with a high degree of politicisation in the context of population centric counter-insurgency, consequently led to the carving out of strategies that reduced dependence on force as the key instrument in the conflict and rather to focus on non-military aspects. In the opinion of some officers, instability had been allowed to escalate by the quarrels and ineptitude of the politicians who failed to perform structural social and economic reforms needed to effectively deal with

²⁵ Quoted in Leal Buitrago, *El Oficio*, p. 79.

²⁶ Fernando Landazábal, *El Desafío*, p.45.

²⁷ Richard Maullin, *Soldiers, Guerillas and Politics in Colombia* (Lexington Mass.: Lexington Books, 1973), pp.117-118.

the causes of violence. Hence, if public order was to be understood as a violence-free Colombia, then other means beyond force should be utilised to achieve that goal. This is not a dilemma exclusive to Colombia. Analysing the British army, Hew Strachan asserts that this is a curse for soldiers in a counter-insurgency role, which forces them to fuse the divide between civil government and military technique; inevitably, the political skills or functions they acquire as professional necessity politicises them.²⁸

The military's misgivings over the lack of adequate political guidance and their increased antipathy towards the politicians have had a distinctive influence on the configuration of the Colombian strategic tradition. It has provided its distinct schools of thought with a shared theme in terms of their suspicions towards the political establishment (as depicted in Figure 2). Moreover, such a view has almost constituted itself as a stab in the back notion for the conduct of civil-military relations in the country. In this respect, it is necessary to re-emphasise a point made in the previous chapter, which is that despite differential appreciations about the means to utilise and define goals and objectives, there is within the Colmil a common antipathy towards the political establishment that provides a degree of inner consistency over the long-term. This manifests itself in a common belief that despite the meddling of politicians in their autonomous operational field, the military is the main institution capable of offering a solution to Colombia's conflict.

The Causes of Violence

One of the main consequences of the Colombian military's autonomous decision-making sphere, the product of the 'Lleras Doctrine,' was to turn the soldiers into interpreters of the nature of the conflict and advocates of particular solutions. The different analysis the military made throughout the years about the causes of violence influenced its strategic formulation,

²⁸ Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.174.

determining its views about the political goals to achieve, as well as judgements about the instrumentality of armed force. A statement by General Fernando Landazábal, Colombia's Defence Minister in 1982, exhibited the conceptual muddle within the military in characterising the causes of unceasing violence:

The essence of the conflict has probably not been understood [...] The Colombian case is different, aggression is internal, the threat lures in her own fields and cities, the pests of underdevelopment corrode coexistence and hence conflict assumes the character of a different war, not less cruel not less intense than that initiated by a traditional invader.²⁹

The conceptual puzzle was even more evident at the moment of identifying the aggressor. As Landazábal stated elsewhere: 'poverty is the *raison d'être* of the insurgency, but Communism is the main cause'.³⁰ Landazábal was an interesting figure, whose career progressed in parallel with the debates that settled the dichotomy in Colombian military thought. In his mind, the distinct facets of the tradition seemed to coexist, hence portraying contradicting postures with regard to the use and utility of the military instrument. He recognised the functionality of military force for defeating the communist guerrillas - consequently opposing negotiations with the insurgents- whilst, simultaneously, declaring force as incapable on its own of dealing with the conflict's core causes. An overview of how these two distinct perspectives about the character of the conflict evolved can help to clarify a crucial influence on the behaviour of the Colombian military.

When Landazábal was an artillery major at the beginning of the 1960s, the Colombian military began to elaborate a 'theory for the deactivation of the causes of violence'³¹. This concept parted from the premise that the pacification effort developed since the early 1950s

²⁹ Landazábal, *El Desafío*, p.44.

³⁰ Fernando Landazábal, *Estrategia de la subversión y su desarrollo en América Latina*, (Bogotá: Editorial Pax, 1969), p.97.

³¹ According to 'Korean' officers the theory served as the basis for the development of *Plan Lazo*, the Colmil's counterinsurgency plan between 1962 and 1965, which will be explained in Chapter 4. In an interview in 1992 by professor Leal, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa explained the lineaments of the theory and how it served to shape the Colmil's early plans. See: Leal, *El Oficio*, p.81. For another description of the theory see particularly Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp.300-320.

was only focusing on combat operations with no strategic framework. Consequently, staking out a diagnosis of the causes of the conflict in which the Colmil's General Staff found itself, would offer the rudiments for future planning. Fundamentally, field grade officers argued that solely by focusing on *Acción Militar* (Military Action), they were only attacking the consequences of violence, not the causes. In that sense, force by itself was incapable of delivering strategic results. For a handful of these officers, including Landazábal, and who formed the first generation of the 'Korean' school of thought, this implied the need to reformulate the general role of the Army. The implications of this line of thought meant, for one part, the establishment of a political stance regarding the military's role in the conflict, and also, *vis-à-vis* Colombian society, based on an assumption that the inherent limitations of the instrumentality of force demanded the military assume non-military tasks to achieve the ends sought. As General Alberto Ruiz Novoa, Army CoS in 1961 and later War Minister declared:

[...] the true mission of the Army, in an underdeveloped country like ours, does not involve exclusively the limited concept of defence of national sovereignty and national institutions. By extension of these, the mission also includes the search for the Nations' progress for the benefit of all Colombians. This can only be achieved through an authentic link between the Army and the People, not for the maintenance of a regressive and static state of affairs but for the conquest of a brighter future [...] the Armed Forces cannot continue to be indifferent in front of the pain and misery of its compatriots whilst having the conscience and the knowledge that it is possible to remedy such and unjust situation.³²

The adoption by the military of a new political aim, and with it, of a civilising mission, would look to fill the gap left by what was diagnosed to be the civilian government's inefficiency in dealing with the conflict. The Colmil would set themselves to improve the well-being of the Colombian peasantry and formulate initiatives leading to economic development which would address the material causes of violence. In short, these assumptions would serve to underpin strategic formulation during the decade, defining the political object and the means

³² Alberto Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*. (Bogotá: Editorial Tercer Mundo, 1965), p. 33.

to achieve it. But what factors influenced the military's formulation of the theory of the causes of violence?

A significant source that influenced military planning during the early sixties were the findings of the 'Commission for the Study of the Causes of Violence' initially set up by the Military Junta in 1958, to inquire into the origins and effects of *La Violencia* and establish the basis for a national policy to deal with it. The Commission was composed of a team of two senior Army officers accompanied by personalities of varied backgrounds, including renowned conservative and liberal politicians. The Commission even included Marxist sociologists and Catholic priests who believed that violence was a product of the defects of Colombia's social and political structure. By formulating the concept of prevailing socio-economic 'structural factors' as the underlying cause of the conflict, its participants came to determine that the Armed Forces could not provide a military solution to the problem alone.

The findings of the Commission were put together in a two volume study titled '*La violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un proceso social*' (Violence in Colombia: Study of a Social Process), authored by a priest and two sociologists that were part of the team. The study appealed to the Colmil leadership, and its recommendations served as parameters for the definition of a new strategic basis during the early 1960s, as will be later discussed in Chapter 4. The crucial point to highlight here is that the Commission findings spoke directly to the 'Korean' school. Its arguments about the limitations of force in counter-insurgency were compelling, and offered a comprehensible diagnosis of the material conditions that generated violence. It encouraged them to understand that their action was conditioned by a social situation, arguing that it was in accordance to it that it had to ultimately develop new methods. In this sense, it was also explicit in affirming that 'force is only one part of the solution, and when it is applied, planning of military action has to be accompanied by a social treatment plan that gives the affected area continued solutions. It is important that the great efforts made [by

the military] to recover its prestige amongst the masses, fits in a coordinated programme at the national level.’³³ In essence, the Commission’s findings led the military command to assume that its strategy should be focused on addressing the causes of violence, and not the violence itself which were defined as the consequence of a broader social problem.

Nonetheless, the ‘Koreans’ meddling in the debate about the social and economic causes of violence, and the redefinition of the mission to openly adopt the participation in non-military roles, seriously strained the already difficult civilian-military relations in the country. Some politicians were overly sensitive about the Command’s new ideas, as they came to believe that the whole argument of dealing with causes rather than effects vindicated leftist violence and promoted partisanship in the ranks. ‘The problem in this country,’ a conservative Senator declared in 1963, ‘is that the military starts studying sociology and politics and then they start conspiring. Then they turn into politicians.’³⁴ Hence, as discussed in Chapter 1, in the view of some civilians, as is currently the case of the followers of former President Uribe, the Colmil’s internal role should be limited to the conduct of operations for the maintenance of public order by combating the armed groups, dismantling them by force and bringing them to justice. Likewise, the Prusso-German school of the military, concurring with this view, has asserted a different approach towards the functionality of force to that of the Koreans. It was a tension which served further to delineate the two strategic perspectives of the military.

In the context of the expansion of the Cold War into Latin America, the fears of communist encroachment in the country intensified. ‘War has now begun within our own borders. Dangers of communism to National Security are so grave like those of classic warfare. [...] Definitely, the destruction of the nation, of the fatherland and of all its permanent essences, are the objectives of this mortal enemy,’ declared Colonel Osiris Villegas, an influential

³³ Germán Guzmán Campos, Orlando Fals Borda and Eduardo Umaña, *La Violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un Proceso Social*, (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1962), p.424.

³⁴ Quoted in Leal Buitrago, *El Oficio*, p. 20.

Argentinian military thinker during the mid-sixties, whose work was widely studied in Colombia, and even published in official Comil publications.³⁵ After the insurrection that proceeded the events of 9 April 1948, the contention that all the liberal *bandoleros* and the peasant self-defence groups that rebelled against conservative rule answered to international communist interests, served to define Colombian violence as just another theatre of the war against the red menace.³⁶ Later, with the Cuban revolution, the exacerbation of the notion of Communism as the main cause of the country's predicaments was highlighted and utilised to explain the nature of the conflict during and define the characteristics and motivations of the enemy. Eventually, the consolidation during the second part of the 1960s of overtly defined Marxist-Leninist insurgencies, the FARC and the ELN mainly, who ever since have endeavoured to overthrow the government, gave weight to a mono-causal view of Colombia's conflict.

However, anti-communism had, for a long time, been part of the Colombian military's ideological worldview. The military mind had received enough dosages of anti-communism to characterise guerrilla challenges in those terms, and to define how and where to apply force. Anti-communism did not germinate in their front line experience in Korea as it has been argued by several authors.³⁷ In fact, it was a visible feature as early as 1927 when the military began to get involved with internal security missions. At that time, the Minister of War defended the internal deployment of the Army to repress labour uprisings and popular agitation under the premise that 'the impetuous and demolishing wave of Soviet Russia's revolutionary ideas have hit the Colombian beachhead, threatening with destruction and ruin, by spreading the seeds of

³⁵ Coronel Osiris G. Villegas, *La Guerra Comunista*, (Bogotá: Librería del Ejército, 1964), pp.7-9.

³⁶ Alonso Moncada, *Un aspecto de la violencia*, (Bogotá: Promotora colombiana, 1963); See also: Vicente Andrade, 'El comunismo responsable de la violencia en Colombia', *Revista Javeriana*, tomo 1 n.299, (1963), pp. 299-303.

³⁷ See in particular: Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, p.80-85 Also: Saul Hernández, *La influencia de los Estados Unidos en el Ejército Colombiano 1951-1959* (Medellín: Editorial La Carreta, 2006), *passim*.

communism.³⁸ Over the next few decades, the Army was used by both liberal and conservative governments as a tool to suppress labour unrest by force, under the pretext of its subversive nature.³⁹

Most importantly, the entrenched notions of anti-communism also added arguments to the doubts about the linkage between socio-economic factors and conflict, and enhanced the view that it could be effectively tackled through military means. ‘The very elimination of criminal or communist anti-social elements appears to have produced a certain rehabilitative effect *per se*, and it cannot be demonstrated with certainty that all areas with miserable economic and social conditions are necessarily violence-prone,’ affirmed a report by the US military mission in the summer of 1964.⁴⁰ Later, in the early 1970s, the arrival of the National Security Doctrine (NSD) in Colombia served to give the ‘internal enemy’ concept a more solid ideological structure, which conditioned the assessments about the capacity of the military instrument. The NSD amounted a combination of counter-insurgency ideas promoted by the US since the 1950s with geopolitical analyzes dating from the 1930s. The doctrine underpinned the rationale of the military regimes of the Southern Cone use of force, by considering insurgents as agents of international communism that posed an existential threat to the security of their respective countries.⁴¹

Indeed, during the 1970s, anti-communism played a key influential role in shaping the mind-set of sections of the military during the revival of guerrilla movements in the region, including the consolidation of the M-19, an urban insurgency that based its operations in

³⁸ Quoted in Gilhodés, ‘El Ejército analiza la Violencia’, p.307.

³⁹ Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, p.35. For an argument in favour of the role of the Army as a tool to control labour unrest during the 1930s and 1940s see the chapter “El Soldado y el Obrero” (*The Soldier and the Worker*) in: Tomás Rueda Vargas, *El Ejército Nacional* (Bogotá: Librería Colombiana 1944).

⁴⁰ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Ruiz –Valencia Exchange highlight problem of military intervention’ 12 June 1964, NND959000 RG59 NARA.

⁴¹ Daniel Mares, ‘The National Security State,’ in Thomas Holloway (ed.), *A Companion to Latin American History* (London: Wiley Blackwell 2011), p.392.

Bogotá. Focusing on terror tactics, the group seemed to represent a direct threat to the political centre.⁴² The tenets of the NSD enhanced the belief that Colombia was the target of well-orchestrated communist aggression, an impression that increased after the success of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 and its influence on the Colombian insurgent movements. As evidenced in General Landazábal's words:

The expansive route of international communism will continue to see in her [Colombia] a formidable pivot to continue the strategy for the domination of the continent [...] with the existence in our territory of armed guerrilla groups, that play strategy with Nicaragua and Cuba in the same plane of international revolution, they open our eyes, to see and think that it would not be strange that the next blazing focus of the conflict will be located in the Colombian Andes. May heaven forgive our auguries, but strategy and tactics have their principles and norms.⁴³

During this period, the belief of the Prusso-German school, that force could be used effectively to defeat the armed structures that supported communist insurgency gained visibility. Its approval ran parallel to the consolidation of the military regimes of the Southern Cone, whose actions against subversion and guerrilla activity was seen as a way forward by many in Colombia. In this sense, the complete removal of the communist threat would require complementing it with other coercive instruments. Anti-subversive war would necessitate an expansion of the battlefield to include the civilian realm. This meant that the military should obtain sufficient legal powers to deal with those suspected of supporting the insurgents and of transmitting communist ideology. An enhanced operational capability, including a strengthened intelligence apparatus would allow the military to persecute the enemy in its civilian hideouts, who would, then, be judged and sentenced or simply disappeared. There was

⁴² An aspect that led to the escalation of violence in Colombia since the late 1970s was the consolidation of a second wave of insurgent groups, most notably the M19, whose modus operandi was influenced by the "urban guerrilla" model of the Southern Cone. Like the insurgent groups that challenged the authoritarian regimes of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina during the 1970s, Colombia's M-19 advocated for a more assertive use of terrorism to achieve their goals. Following the ideas of revolutionary thinkers like Brazilian Carlos Marighella, it understood that operations in urban areas aimed "to baffle, discredit, harass the military and other forces of repression, and to destroy or loot goods belonging to North Americans, heads of foreign firms, or the upper classes". A main method to achieve this was 'revolutionary terrorism', an activity in which, according to Marighella: 'the guerrilla must always be adaptable.' See: Carlos Marighella, *For the liberation of Brazil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp.73-89.

⁴³ Landazábal, *El Precio de la Paz*, p. 225.

no unanimity within the Colmil that such an undertaking would guarantee a political victory over the insurgency. Colombian soldiers, during the height of the NSD, would still flirt with the notions of the socio-economic causes of violence with the purpose of defining the political ends of their strategy.⁴⁴ Eventually, the different opinions about the causes of violence in Colombia matured to coexist within the military mind. That coexistence generated tensions in the judgements about the bearing of the military instrument, and functioned as a distinctive element in the Colombian military strategic tradition.

‘Guns and Mattocks’ – the Colmil and state-building

As has been emphasised already, a distinguishing feature in the development of the Colombian military tradition has been the proposal of varied approaches for the utilisation of military resources to confront the internal conflict. In this context, the view that the military should assume a state-building role, utilising other means apart from force to achieve a violence-free Colombia has evolved into a strong motif since the early 1950s. Given the strength of such a view, it is important to dissect the main concepts that structured it in order to be able to generate a more complete picture of the evolution of the strategic tradition.

In fact, the fixation of a military sector with the development of strategies that have emphasised taking on state-building responsibilities can be traced to the inception of the modern Colombian military in the first decade of the 20th century. Historians suggest that the independence of Panamá from Colombia, in the aftermath of the War of the Thousand Days, made the government overly sensitive about the possibilities of secessionism, and thus, proposed that the newly created National Army should aid in the construction of the nation by colonising the vast amount of land that was beyond the control of Bogotá.⁴⁵ A similar argument

⁴⁴ Leal, *El Oficio*, pp.101-102.

⁴⁵ Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas en Colombia*, pp.87-89.

is made by Frederick Nunn, who explains that for Colombian politicians of the time, a professional military – following a European model- would not only put an end to an era of martial improvisation that had contributed to the country’s violent 19th century, but would be a definite step for the consolidation of the nation under the ascendancy of the conservative movement of the Regeneration.⁴⁶ Nunn explains that this theme was by the mid-20th century shaped by military ideas circulating in Latin America, influenced by French Marshall Lyautey for example, about the need to assume a social role that was considered necessary for the advancement of what they judged were the retrograde societies and economies of the borderlands.⁴⁷ The use of the military as tool of national consolidation in those terms, has transcended in time. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was a central theme in the design of the counter-insurgency programmes of the 1960s and, with certain caveats, was present in Plan Colombia; later underpinned ‘Consolidation’, the stabilisation programme of President Uribe’s Security and Defence policy; and is palpable in the current narrative of Territorial Peace advanced by President Santos’ leading peace negotiator with FARC, Sergio Jaramillo.

Undoubtedly, up to the late 1980s, the Colombian military was the sole national institution, apart from the Catholic Church,⁴⁸ that provided any meaningful state presence in the vastness of Colombia’s southern tropical forests and jungles that amounts to almost half of its 1,200 million km². The framework of the modern Colombian state was, since its foundation

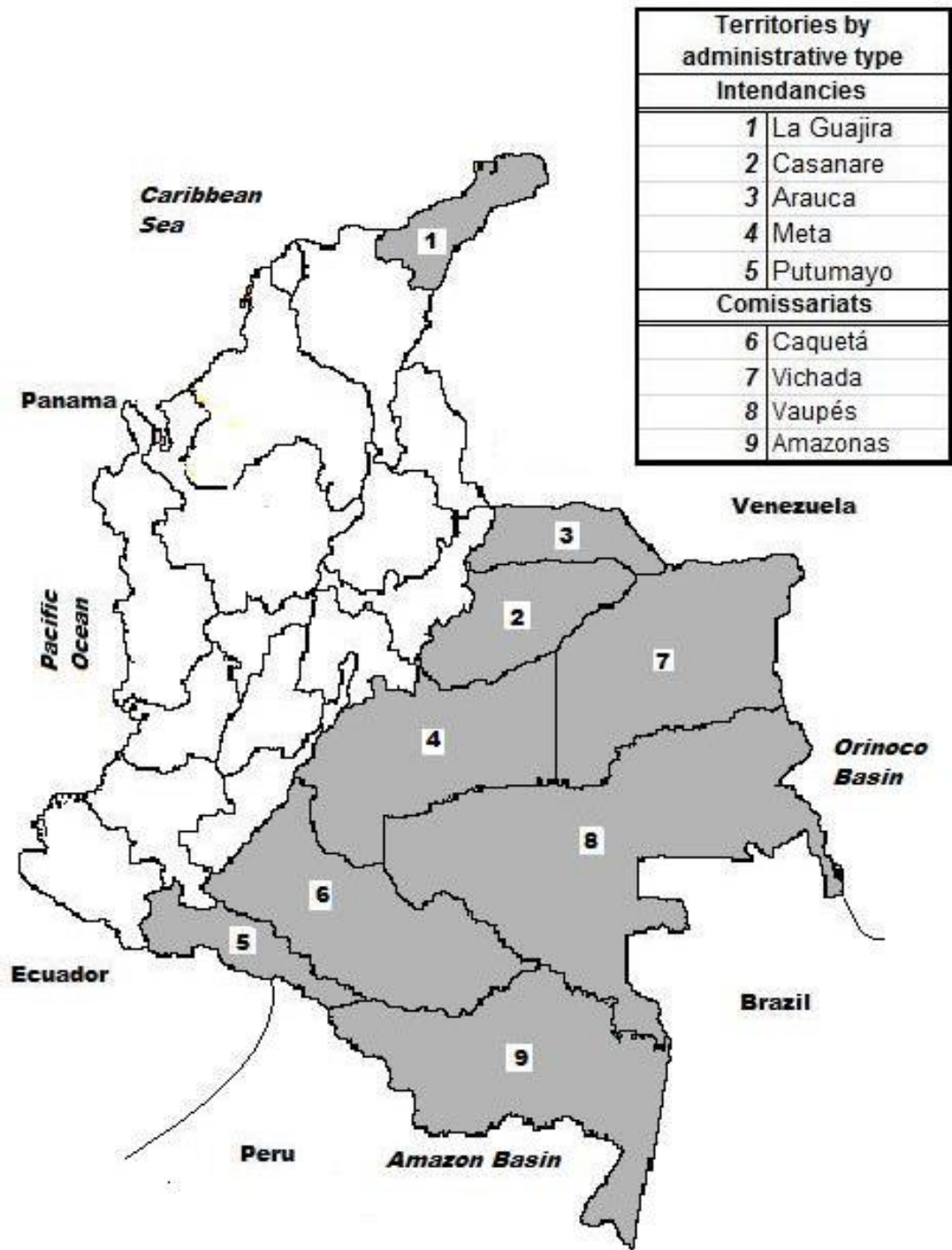
⁴⁶ The Regeneration refers to a reactionary political movement that led to the constitution of 1886 and was triumphant in the War of the thousand days. The Regeneration inaugurated 50 years of Conservative dominance in Colombia, defeating the ‘liberal revolution’ that promoted federalism and anti-clericalism, and establishing a centralised government and restoring the power of the Roman Catholic Church. See: Bushnell, *The making of modern Colombia*, pp.140-154.

⁴⁷ Frederick Nunn, *The time of the Generals: Latin American professional militarism in world perspective*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 47, 110; As Nunn suggests, the social role in Latin American military thought, also brought to the fore the notion that soldiers had a ‘civilising mission’ in the less developed regions of their countries. The characteristic of this notion in Colmil thought are developed in the following section.

⁴⁸ It has to be noted that the separation of state and Church in Colombia was only mandated in the Constitution of 1991.

in 1886, modelled on the centralised political administration of the French departmental system.

Figure 3 Distribution of 'National Territories' ca.1959



Conversely, the peripheral territories, especially those that lay beyond the Andes Cordillera in the eastern plains towards the Orinoco basin and those to the south towards the jungles of the Amazonian basin, remained unexplored, scarcely inhabited and outside the modernising effort of Bogotá's central government. These areas were assigned the general title of 'National Territories', which were to remain under pre-republican modes of direct rule as commissariats or intendancies (see Figure 3) up to 1991.⁴⁹ During a greater part of the 20th century, the administration of the farthest and most complex of these territories was delegated to the military, which had to take on civilian responsibilities and which in time performed a colonisation role.⁵⁰

It was primarily in the Amazonian basin, which was considered a contested area threatened by predatory neighbours and where the Colombian state presence was weak, that the military was initially deployed in colonising missions. For example, the increased presence of Peruvian rubber producers in Colombia's southernmost extreme triggered a quick war between both countries in 1932. To protect their business interests, rubber impresarios influenced the government in Lima to annex the Colombian Amazonian port city of Leticia. As part of the war effort against Peru, the Colmil opened roads, installed advanced posts and even inaugurated villages as a means to consolidate a jungle frontier of more than 1,000 kilometres along the Putumayo and Amazon rivers.⁵¹ Once the League of Nations intervened to negotiate an end to the war and restore the international borders, returning Leticia to Colombia, military colonisation activities began to lose their predominance. Colmil commanders shifted their priorities as a result of increased prestige and the boost in defence

⁴⁹ The organisational framework of the Colombian state as established in the Constitution of 1886, was only transformed with the expedition of a new Constitution in 1991 which made the remaining National Territories into Departments.

⁵⁰ Maullin, *Soldiers*, p.56.

⁵¹ Alfonso Pinzón Forero, *La colonización militar y el conflicto Colombo-Peruano*, (Bogotá: Ediciones "Acore," 1990), p.35.

spending after the Amazonian war. An enhanced professional ethos led to a focus on the technical preparation for 'conventional' warfare during the second part of the 1930s, under tutelage of German instructors and advisors.⁵² As a US Navy intelligence report of the period put it, it defined the Colombian military's 'adherence to European conceptions of army training, strategy, and tactics.'⁵³

However, the reformist Liberal governments that came to power in the second half of the 1930s proposed an agenda of state modernisation that would collide with the military's new 'conventional' priorities. Liberal politicians foresaw the reactivation of the colonisation role of the military in the periphery as a way to integrate these areas socially and economically to the nation. The army, they argued, had social utility, and hence should not be taken as a tool to achieve military ends in case of war, but should be used as a tool that could aid in times of peace the ends of the reformist Liberal government, as President Alfonso Lopez elucidated:

The conformation of the country gives the army another mission that has not been thoroughly completed, not because of lack of will, but because the civilian government has not oriented it towards it: the domination and conquest of territories, that being within our borders have not been reduced to the jurisdiction of authority, being distant and uninhabited [...] A Nation that has three quarters of its territory with no contact with its culture, offers the army a new field of activity that has not been exploited for collective benefit.⁵⁴

In effect, segments of officer corps agreed with the political postures of President Lopez and his emphasis on the need for the military to have a more pronounced role in the construction of the nation. Some officers developed a contempt of garrison life and with an army that seemed to have become redundant after the Peruvian war, conversely projecting an idyllic view of the Amazonian territories. 'No other place in Colombia where the fatherland feels more present and alive [...] in our banks of the Amazon outposts of military colonisers, hoist our flag

⁵² Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas*, pp.50-52.

⁵³ 'History of Nazi Influences among personnel of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Colombia,' 3 February 1940, Military Intelligence Division "Regional File" 1922 -44 COLUMBIA, RG 165.4, Box 622, NARA.

⁵⁴ Quoted in: Gerardo Molina, *Las ideas liberales en Colombia*, (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1974), p. 120.

like a thin Colombian link,' recalled Valencia Tovar.⁵⁵ Rather than military technique, the principal role for soldiers whilst undertaking the colonising mission was that of public administration. The early experience with colonisation in the Amazon left a deep mark on Colmil thinking and behaviour, especially after *La Violencia*, when guerrilla groups began to exploit the vastness of the uncontrolled periphery, which drew, once again, the attention of many soldiers to longstanding ideas about state-building as the means to solve the conflict.

However, as Valencia Tovar recalls, President Lopez's (twice President of Colombia, from 1934-38 and later in 1942-44) advocacy of the need for the military to retake state-building was actually 'disastrous and indisposed the army commanders greatly', as 'his intention of turning a military that he believed vegetated like dead weight in the barracks into an instrument of progress, was taken as an insult by the officers who began talking about changing weapons for mattocks.'⁵⁶ The President's agenda during his second term only served to increase the growing hostility of certain military commanders who believed the liberal administration aimed at reducing the importance of the Army because of its alleged sympathies with the former ruling Conservative party, and hence, intended to affect its capabilities and resources and to ostracise them in the jungles. In this tense environment, a rogue group of Army Colonels even attempted an improvised *coup d'état* against Lopez's government in June 1944. The failed uprising surfaced many of the tensions within the officer corps with regards to the national mission of the military. Divisions became clear amongst those that seconded the liberal party's modernisation rhetoric, and those who exposed a professionalised or Prussian outlook. Whilst the former were not hostile to expanding the role of the military to state-building tasks, the latter promoted their newly acquired Prussian ethos with a focus on

⁵⁵ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio de una época* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1992), pp.87-89.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.57-58.

technique and the preparation for inter-state war and the maintenance of public order, confining themselves to their given constitutional duties.

After the arrival of the Rojas Pinilla regime in 1953, as a reaction to the Conservative government's sectarianism and the growing violence, the Colmil revived the state-building narrative in the belief that it would put an end to the conflict and improve living conditions. It reasoned, that *La Violencia* had a socio-economic origin, and hence that through a programme of colonisation in the uninhabited periphery the issue of inequitable land distribution could be resolved and the creation of conditions for economic development could be achieved without resorting to communist style policies. Rojas' agenda was influenced by the doctrine of *desarrollismo*, which promoted substantial levels of military intervention to advance policies of development and industrialisation, which at the time were fashionable in Venezuela, Argentina or Brazil.⁵⁷ This went in parallel to the diffusion throughout the region of the 'dependency school' of economics, elaborated by Raúl Prebisch, director of the UNECLAC (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), that influenced the conceptualization of military and civilian leaders about state directed action, and drove the ideological debate surrounding economic development in the continent⁵⁸ The resurgence of the state-building discourse under Rojas outlived his military government, despite the lack of any substantial implementation of the development agenda. Shortly after the restoration of democracy in 1958, military state-building became an essential strategic concept for those officers of the Korea generation who would advocate population-centric counter-insurgency at the turn of the decade. The link between counter-insurgency thinking and the concepts of military state-building in Colombia during the early 1960s, as presented in the previous chapter, was underpinned in President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, which considered that Latin

⁵⁷ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p.45.

⁵⁸ José Antonio Ocampo, 'New Economic Thinking in Latin America,' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol.22, Issue-1-2 (1990), pp. 161-181.

American militaries were central agents in accelerating the transit of their countries to modernity by assisting in the implementation of economic development initiatives in areas facing guerrilla warfare.⁵⁹ Chapter 4 will analyse in detail how this state-building theme evolved in Colmil thinking during the beginning of the 1960s and became a source of tension in the formulation of strategy.

The emphasis on state-building in Colmil thought has also been a consequence of the reaction by insurgents to the application of force against their base areas since the early 1950s. Military pressure normally forced the rebels to seek sanctuary deep in the periphery where government presence was either weak or non-existent. As will be explained in subsequent chapters, the Villarica campaign against the communist armed groups and their civilian base, initiated by General Rojas in 1954 in the central Andes close to Bogota, led them to respond to the military offensive by relocating deep in the cordillera in departments of Tolima and Cauca, where they founded the enclaves of *Marquetalia* and *El Pato*. The first enclave fell in mid-1964, and the second in the spring of 1965. The offensive of the Colmil led to a further relocation of the guerrilla forces and the civilian population that supported them towards the jungle fringes in the south eastern territory of Meta. In the Colombian equivalent of Mao's Long March, peasant columns of hundreds of families, protected by mobile guerrillas under the command of Manuel Marulanda 'Tirofijo', arrived in an uncontrolled area of the Ariari River where they pitched camp, replenished their armies, and joined with other communists groups to create the FARC in 1966.⁶⁰ The key point is that the insurgents' response to the Colmil's initial campaigns inevitably led to a recognition of the limits of military force in the

⁵⁹ Edwin Liuwen, *Arms and Politics in Latin America*, (New York: Preager, 1960), pp.137-139; Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000), p.168.

⁶⁰ Eduardo Pizarro, 'Revolutionary Guerrilla Groups in Colombia', In: Charles Bergquist, Gonzalo Sánchez and Ricardo Peñaranda, *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Wilmington DE: SR Books, 1992), p.181.

conflict by officers close to the Korean tradition, who proposed different courses of action to compensate for their limited capacity to obtain victory through the destruction of the adversary's forces.

The FARC historically prospered in these remote areas where the Colombian authorities have had a historically weak or non-existent presence. There, the insurgency advanced its own process of armed colonisation, creating shadow state structures through the political, social and economic organisation of the peasantry that arrived in search for new arable land, escaping urban poverty or simply displaced by violence.⁶¹ An expansion of Colombia's agrarian frontier during the 1970s and 80s triggered constant peasant colonisation processes deeper into 'virgin jungles' in the national territories of Caquetá and Vaupes. These late processes of peasant colonisation were the consequence of pressure exerted by cattle ranchers and large landowners who established industrial commercial farms and bought out their land legally, or who sometimes simply took over through coercive means. Another essential factor from the late 1970s was the arrival of the cocaine trade, which also increased the pressure for new land in the jungles and tropical forests of the south east. In these recently colonised areas, a process of peasant organisation by the FARC ensued, which secured them with new sources of income by taxing coca cultivation.

This context offered the Colmil with new elements of analysis to reinforce the concept of state-building as part of its strategic formulation to counter-insurgency. In other words, to counter the FARC's own colonisation project, the military maintained its interest in colonisation and state-building in the periphery as grounding of its later strategic formulation. The previous chapter showed, for example, how during the 1990s counter-narcotics initiatives, like the US backed 'Plan Colombia', were welcomed by Colmil officers as means to

⁶¹ Alfredo Molano, 'Violence and Land Colonization,' In: Charles Bergquist, et.al, *Violence in Colombia*, pp.206-207.

consolidate their presence in the peripheral areas and challenge the FARC's control of the local population.⁶² These ideas made particular sense to those officers that had been brought up under the aegis of the Koreans. Following the tenets of counter-insurgency thinking, by the turn of the 1980s, senior officers would still promote the techniques of population –centric counter-insurgency they had come in touch during their formative years, like: *Civic Action*, *Psychological Action* and *Communal Action*. These tactics had the objective of curtailing the growth of insurgent sources of power by counter mobilising the peasantry through socio-economic development initiatives with the purpose of integrating them into the nation. However, the problem was that these methods were conceived under the rationalist framework that characterised counter-insurgency theory as promoted since the 1960s, which meant that it was considered as a formula applicable to all contingencies.⁶³ The Colombian military mind was receptive to this line of thinking due to its profession of faith in an enlightened vision of man, as will be argued in the next theme.

Catholicism and the civilising mission

The modern Colombian military was created under the auspices of the triumphant conservative government after the War of a Thousand days from 1899 to 1902 which proposed the amalgamation of the triumphant conservative army with the defeated liberals into a nonpartisan organisation. On the one hand, the creation of a truly national and professional army could, fundamentally, serve to prevent another civil war. Because in the words of a Colombian military historian, it could put an end to 'those days in which the landowner made himself a brigadier general, made his major-domo and foremen into a staff armed his peons with muskets

⁶² Valencia Tovar, 'A view from Bogotá', pp.21-24. For details of Colmil state-building initiatives at the beginning of Plan Colombia in coca growing regions see: Putumayo Operations: CD Battalions Continue Operations Confidential, Cable, Excised Copy; Forwarded Copy, 001439 , 15 February 2001. Accessed via DNSA.

⁶³ M.L.R. Smith and David M. Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles and Paradoxes*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp.81-87.

or machetes and issued *pronunciamientos*.⁶⁴ To accomplish this goal, the formation of a professional officer corps would be required, and so the government hired in 1907 a Chilean Military Mission to establish and run the *Escuela Militar de Cadetes* (Military Cadet School) under its received Prussian influence.

On the face of it, if the professionalisation of the Colmil aimed at placing it above the sectarian questions that had led the political parties to war eight times during the 19th century; the real mission translated until the outbreak of *La Violencia* in the defence of the constitutional order structured under the values of the Conservative ascendancy and the commitment to the defence of Roman Catholicism as the religion of the nation.⁶⁵ This ‘religious issue’, had since the independence of Colombia, been one of the main points of contention between the two parties, with the Conservatives finally imposing their position after their military victory in 1902.⁶⁶ Until the drafting of a new Constitution in 1991, which effectively removed the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church and promoted the establishment of a secular and plural society, the Colmil adhered institutionally to the promotion of the Christian tradition as the defining value of the Colombian nation, even if individual officers might have professed different views about the religious question.⁶⁷ In this sense, Catholicism played an important role in forming the military’s ideological core of motivations, and since 1948 with the

⁶⁴ Quoted in: Nunn, *The Time of the Generals*, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas*, p.65.

⁶⁶ Charles Bergquist, ‘Introduction: Colombian violence in historical perspective’, In Charles Bergquist, et.al, *Violence in Colombia*, pp.13-15.

⁶⁷In fact, the partisan divide was still present during conservative rule, and hence there was a segregation policy for the entrance to the *Escuela Militar*. A ‘baptism certificate’ and confirmation of good- conduct issued by a priest was an acceptance requirement. Cadets of ‘liberal’ origin were only accepted fully after 1930, when the Liberal party returned to power. Most of these officers conformed the first generation of ‘Koreans’, like Alberto Ruiz Novoa (1936 alumnus) Alvaro Valencia (1942 alumnus). Liberal President Alfonso López Pumarejo, elected in 1934, sought through his *Revolución en marcha* to modernise Colombia. This required an expansion of secularism, which would also impact the composition of the Colmil. However, his projects succumbed to clerical opposition, the divisions of his own party and the Conservative sentiments of the senior officer corps, some of whom tried a *coup d’état* against him in 1944. A weakened Lopez resigned in 1945 paving the way to the Conservative presidential victory in 1946 which signaled the beginning of La Violencia. For more on this history see for example: Atehortúa and Vélez, *Estado y Fuerzas Armadas*, p.80.

intensification of violence and the political polarisation brought by the Cold War, it became deeply influential in the definition of objectives and the selection of means employed to counter the armed groups that began to proliferate.

The Catholic dimension in the military's thinking became increasingly discernible in the early 1950s with the escalation of *La Violencia*. The brutality of the undeclared civil war between the political parties generated a sense that Colombia was in need of a moral regeneration, before it fell in an abyss and in the hands of Communism. On these terms, the military government that emerged in June 1953 under General Rojas Pinilla began to promote a populist palingenetic rhetoric that demanded the creation of a 'Christian and Bolivarian State.' In essence, as David Bushnell, put it, the Christian side of the General's political discourse was far from clear and simply amounted to a close collaboration between the Church and the military run state⁶⁸; eventually understood as the carrying out of social deeds to in some way improve the living conditions of the rural population affected by the conflagration. It was only after the fall of the Rojas regime that the military took steps beyond mere rhetoric and began to pursue a plan of action to confront violence deeply influenced by concepts drawn from Catholic sources. The plans drawn out would ultimately take the form of a civilising mission for the military. Catholic thinking in the military during the early stages of the Cold War, especially under French influence, transposed concepts drawn from its 19th and early 20th centuries' colonial experiences in Africa and Asia, with the profession of faith in an enlightened vision of man as a rational being and in the idea of progress as a universal value to be exported to guide rebellious indigenous populations.⁶⁹ As William Rosenau suggests, the *mission civilatrice* as drawn by the French, found an obvious parallel with modernisation theory as

⁶⁸ David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.215.

⁶⁹ Douglas Porch, 'The dangerous myths and dubious promise of COIN,' *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22: 2 (2011), p.240.

developed by US economists. As will be discussed in later chapters, these ideas shaped the Alliance for Progress and the general approach to counter-insurgency during the 1960s in Latin America and South East Asia.⁷⁰ The rationalist framework in which these concepts operated led to the belief that they were indeed formulas of universal applicability conducive to the progress to modernity of undeveloped countries. Hence, it generated a preoccupation with the design and application of a method and technique able to surmount particular circumstances.⁷¹

One of the principal Catholic influences for Colombian military planners after the late 1950s were the observations of a French Dominican priest, Louis-Joseph Lebret who in the early 1940s had founded the 'Economy and Humanism' movement advocating the need to 'put back the economy at the service of man'. The initiation of economic development across the third world would allow the resolution of the social contradictions generated by capitalism and avoid the expansion of communism. Lebret visited Colombia in 1956, which he recognised as another case of correlation between unequal economic development and rebellious violence. Consequentially, he proposed that the military should perform civil and socioeconomic duties. Following Lebret's recommendations, Army CoS General Alberto Ruiz Novoa in 1962 expressed the view that, 'the defence against communism does not essentially reside in the force of arms; it rests in the elimination of social inequality following the democratic and Christian norms that are found in the encyclicals.'⁷² During a time of religious revival, amid the Second Vatican Council which in part drew inspiration from Lebret's work, the appreciation of the concept of economic and material progress as a universal remedy for

⁷⁰ Roseanau, 'The Kennedy Administration,' p.74; For a synopsis of the evolution of Cold War modernisation agenda and its influence in counter-insurgency thinking see: M.L.R. Smith and David M. Jones, *Modern Counterinsurgency*, pp.58-67.

⁷¹ Parting from the ideas of Michael Oakeshott, authors like William Rosenau, M.L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, have highlighted the rationalist features of counterinsurgency thinking, its focus on finding formulas of general application and the fixation with technique. See: Roseneau, *Ibid.*; M.L.R. Smith and David M.Jones Jones, 'Grammar but No Logic: Technique is Not Enough – A Response to Nagl and Burton', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33: 3 (2010), p.440.

⁷² Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*, p.55.

communism gained important weight within the military, especially for those like Ruiz Novoa who promoted the notion of the material causes of violence. It enhanced in them the belief that pursuing military enterprises, which combined force with social deeds would enlighten the Colombian peasantry and liberate it from Communism. 'Humanity is facing an inexorable dilemma: Christ or Marx. From our future actions it will depend if the people of Colombia opts for the formulae of Christ and rejects the monstrous scam of the sombre and messianic philosopher,' Ruiz Novoa explained.⁷³ In such a context, the use of the military instrument in a civilising enterprise placing emphasis on the utilisation of other means rather than force to confront the nascent insurgencies, found a strong ideological basis for the development of strategy during the first half of 1960s.

However, by the 1970s, with the height of the NSD as a new canon for conducting counter-insurgency, the Catholic element in military thinking took another turn. It expanded in opposition to the 'hearts and minds' approach of the proponents of Civic Action during the climatic years of The Alliance for Progress. First, there was a determination for more autonomous and energetic action from the military instrument, given the fears of a potential abandonment from the US, as it had done, in the opinion of many soldiers, with Vietnam and Iran.⁷⁴ These fears, following the arguments of Michael McClintock, were evidently incentivised by what many of them considered to be the Carter's administration 'human rights pontification' that resulted in a decision to curtail military aid.⁷⁵ As McClintock also argues, the vacuum produced by the diminishing of overt advisory and material requirement by US assistance was filled by Argentina, Israel and France.⁷⁶ Second, following from this previous

⁷³ Alberto Ruiz Novoa, 'Justicia Social y Propósito Nacional,' *Revista del Ejército*, Vol. 2, No.6 (1962), p.45.

⁷⁴ Jack Child, *Geopolitics and Conflict in South America. Quarrels among Neighbors*, (NY: Praeger, 1985), pp. 7-11.

⁷⁵ Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: US Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-insurgency, and Counter-terrorism 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p.315.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.317.

point, Latin American militaries began to view themselves as the last bastion of Christian civilisation in face of what they considered was the moral decay of the West and the advance of Marxism Leninism, which had even ‘contaminated’ the Catholic church with the advent of liberation theology.⁷⁷ But as Douglas Porch has shown, this brutal dimension of ‘civilising’ thinking in Latin American counter-insurgency can be traced to the early 1960s, with the influx to Argentina of French veterans, many of them radicalized anti-communists that had participated in the *Organisation de l’armée secrète*, and who worked as military advisers helping to outline the doctrines of Southern Cone military regimes which used these teachings to confront the growth of the new urban insurgencies like the Montoneros or Tupamaros. Considering ‘subversives’ as irredeemable enemies, for soldiers the conduct of counter-insurgency took the form of a total war that validated the use of brutal force.⁷⁸ It became a struggle between good and evil in which military action should not have limitations in removing the sources of the threat, even if it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe given the supposed pervasiveness of communism within the civilian population.⁷⁹ The systematisation of these ideas in the Southern Cone were conducive to *Operación Condor*, that possessed a strongly internationalist dimension and led to close military collaboration across the continent.⁸⁰

These ideas took hold in the Colmil, mainly as a result of the intensification of the conflict from the mid-1970s, which led officers to encourage the adoption of many of the

⁷⁷ Since the late 1960s, the Colmil became anxious with the profusion of ‘rebel priests’ who made part of what became known as the Golconda group, and promoted socialist revolution eventually joining the ELN guerrilla ranks. See US embassy Bogotá to DoS, ‘Ferment within Catholic church’, RG 59 1967-69, Pol3Cons-IA to Pol 12 Col, Box 1989, 25 April 1969, NARA.

⁷⁸ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, pp.230-231.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ For recent analysis on the development of counterinsurgency thinking in the Southern Cone and the influence of NSD and Operation Condor, see: Paul Rich, ‘A historical overview of US counter-insurgency’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 25:1 (2014), pp.19-20; also Daniel Mares, ‘The National Security State’ in Thomas H. Holloway (ed), *A Companion to Latin American History*, (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), pp. 386–402.

precepts of NSD to face what they considered to be an imminent threat to the survival of the state by these internal enemies. The military leadership's petitions were duly accepted by Julio Cesar Turbay, president from 1978 to 1982, who decreed one of the most severe states of emergency's in the history of the conflict. Turbay's administration put in place a 'National Security Statute' which systematised the requests of the military to enable them to repress the 'subversives' with all means at their disposal, and, nip the international communist conspiracy that guided them in the bud. But let us see in more detail how these effects of the NSD, that is the reading of subversion and insurgency as a conspiracy against Western civilization and ideals, shaped the Colmil's judgements about the use of force.

A first point to make is that Colmil officers from the mid-1970s based themselves on their southern peers, and even justified their decision to remove civilian government and establish military rule. They would consider this to be the last resort to prevent the triumph of the insurgents and to protect 'civilisation'. 'In many nations the military assumed power against their constitutional mandates and political traditions, in order to protect them' wrote General Landazábal in 1982.⁸¹ However, the Colombians did not get close to intervening in politics in the same fashion and create a 'National Security State', despite how vocal and politicised some officers became. Civil-military tensions, were nonetheless, acute during the unpopular Government of Liberal Alfonso Lopez Michelsen (1970-74).⁸² In fact, the President had feared a *coup d'état* against him directed by Army CoS General Alvaro Valencia Tovar, who had been

⁸¹ Landazabal, *El Conflicto Social*, p.157.

⁸² The context of the country in the period, and the reaction of the military, was well described in a CIA intelligence report which is useful to quote to give a better taste of the politics of the mid-1970s: "Colombia one of the two remaining democracies in South America, is beset by economic hardships, rampant crime, and guerrilla. These problems weigh heavily in the country's already volatile political arena [...] they have led to an increase in extremist activity, particularly by small leftist groups. They have encouraged strikes in both public and private sectors resulting in demonstrations and violence. The country's long-standing rural terrorism by pro-Moscow, pro-Havana and pro-Peking groups has also increased [...] These problems also have led to growing dissatisfaction among armed forces officers. The military's reaction is not at present, however, a threat to Colombia's democratic tradition of democratic government." See: 'Colombia: Troubles for President López.' Secret, Intelligence Summary, 26 November 1976. Accessed via: DNSA.

very critical of the president's policy towards the ELN in the aftermath of *Operación Anorí* in 1973.⁸³ The Colmil leadership has generally argued that the government of Lopez Michelsen robbed them of a definite military victory against the ELN, as the political decision not to offer the military the resources to consolidate the area of influence of that insurgency, after the armed resistance of the guerrillas had been reduced in the Anorí area, had in their view allowed the enemy to relocate and gather new strength.⁸⁴ When the ELN began to mount an urban terrorism campaign, which included an exponential rise in cases of kidnappings and retaliatory attacks against high-ranking officers that had participated in *Operación Anorí*, the Colmil's patience with Lopez Michelsen began to break.⁸⁵ Eventually, in a strong public letter addressed to the president, the military leadership (33 high ranking generals and admirals) articulated their discontent with the state of national security, demanding that the administration take immediate action to confront the rise in crime and terrorist activity. According to the interpretation of US officials, the Colmil's declaration 'implied that if the government proved unwilling or incapable of preserving the peace, the armed forces would.'⁸⁶ Cornered by the Colmil's brass,

⁸³ Some members of the Colmil have argued that President's Lopez decision not to support the Colmil was influenced by his father's own negative experience with the army in 1944, and so, that he did not offer more resources out of fear that the Colmil would increase its political influence. See: Luis Villamarín, *Condor en el aire* (Bogotá: TM Editores, 1999), p. 20. In a similar vein, Valencia Tovar, as an interested party who held a personal grudge against the President after his dismissal, argued that the President did not support the military (that is, Valencia's own decisions as Army CoS) due to a question of ego. Valencia sustained that President Lopez decided to give the surviving units of the ELN a respite as a gesture of goodwill to initiate a political dialogue in which he could take credit as peacemaker. For his account of the crisis see: Álvaro Valencia Tovar, *Los presidentes que yo conocí*, (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2013), pp. 374-382.

⁸⁴ The argument of many members of the Colmil has been that the Lopez Michelsen administration committed a 'strategic mistake' preventing the army to consolidate its gains against the ELN in Anorí. The long-standing view has been that the government's leniency allowed a marginalised ELN to recover forces as its leadership was able to reorganize in the frontier with Venezuela. The ELN believed that they could create revolutionary conditions taking advantage of the growing oil industry, by mobilising the workers and extorting the international companies that settled their businesses in Arauca. See: Hernan Hurtado Vallejo, 'Operación Anorí: golpe al corazón del ELN,' in, Glenda Martínez (ed.), *Hablan los generales*, pp.145-171; Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.238.

⁸⁵ An ELN hitman failed in his attempt to murder General Valencia Tovar while driving to the streets of Bogotá. Less fortunate was General Rincon Quiñones, who as commander of the Vth Army Brigade had led Operation Anorí, and was killed in the same modus operandi in 1975.

⁸⁶ 'Colombia: Military Pressures López to Control Crime Wave,' Secret, Intelligence Summary, 4 January 1978. Accessed via: DNSA.

Lopez Michelsen allowed them to map out the emergency measures that seven months later, President Turbay would officially adopt in the form of the 'National Security Statute.'⁸⁷

The second point, hence, is that at least operationally Colmil officers would discover in the experience, of say the Argentinian or Brazilian militaries, answers to confront the escalating urban violence of the M-19 and the ELN in the late 1970s. To preserve the nation from communism, the set of tactics and procedures promoted by NSD were to be articulated in the said 'National Security Statute' that demanded, almost in Ludendorff's terms, to place all the existing moral, physical and material forces at the service of the war.⁸⁸ This line of thinking paved the way for the more brutal side of the civilising mission, where the removal of the threat by force was seen as expedient to secure the survival of the Christian way of life, in opposition to the attempts of the early 1960s to assimilate those contaminated by communism by manipulating their structures of incentives through a mixture of coercion and social deeds. And as it occurred in the Southern Cone, the implicit commitment to a dogma of the value of armed force as the only useful tool to protect civilisation, eventually served to open the chapter of the 'dirty war', with the utilisation of all the instruments of power available at the disposal of the military – legal and illegal – to exterminate the enemy. One of these instruments was an enhanced intelligence gathering apparatus acting in counter-subversion role with no adequate constraints or legal accountability.⁸⁹ Military force was to operate without constraints, facilitating the institutionalisation of torture, collective punishments and the proliferation of paramilitary forces. In Colombia, it included an expansion of the Colmil's prerogatives in the implementation of martial law between 1978 and 1982, which allowed them to detain anyone suspect of subversive activities. But chiefly, under the totalising influence of the NSD, the

⁸⁷ See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Internal Security: GOC Promulgates Tough New Security Statute,' Limited Official Use, Cable, 8 September 1978. Accessed via: DNSA

⁸⁸ Leal, *El oficio de la guerra*, p.19.

⁸⁹ Smith and Roberts, 'War in the Gray', p.393.

military sustained the need to facilitate national mobilisation and pressed for laws that allowed using the civilian population to contribute for the ‘reestablishment of public order’. By the turn of the 1970s, General Landazábal asserted: ‘Our proposal has to be clear, simple, and widely known, to work shoulder to shoulder with those in civilian clothes to achieve their security, the continuous progress of the nation, and the establishment of peace.’⁹⁰ Whilst the existence of self-defence groups, to be controlled and supervised by the Colmil, was authorised by law since 1965, it was only with the NSD that it took major effect, when the government began to allow their proliferation to serve as proxies for the military.⁹¹ But as expected, these groups were to be forced to their logical military end of removing the communist threat by force. The self-defence groups (referred to as paramilitaries since the 1980s when they became autonomous organizations financed by drug traffickers) began to be used as means to collect intelligence, to conduct military operations, but also as force multipliers, in the form of death-squads with the purpose of ‘cleaning up’ anyone suspected of being a communist or an insurgent collaborator.⁹²

Indeed, distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants became challenging for the Colmil as a result of the influence of the NSD. This was particularly the case in the mid-1980s, in the aftermath of Betancur’s peace negotiations because with the acquiescence of the government, the FARC and the Communist Party were allowed to create a legal political platform to participate in local and national elections. Known as the *Union Patriótica* (Patriotic Union), the group became the target of a systematic campaign of annihilation, after the peace process backfired, which concluded with the murder of over 3,000 people between 1986 and 1990 in the hands of the paramilitary death-squads who connived with sections of the Colmil.⁹³

⁹⁰ Quoted in: Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, p.41.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

The fact is that for many in the military, these ‘unarmed subversives’ were as dangerous as their armed *confrères* in the guerrillas, as they worked together in the advancement of a revolutionary strategy that combined all means of struggle, violent and non-violent – the Colombian version of Vietnamese *Dau tranh*.⁹⁴ As the Minister of Defence declared in 1988, ‘subversive groups act openly in national politics when they find it convenient, and when it does not, and they go into hiding under the indifferent eye of the Colombian people.’⁹⁵

The havoc generated by the paramilitary groups, and the fact that many began to ally themselves with the growing drug mafias, led the Colombian government to proscribe them in 1988. For many in the Colmil, this was considered a step backward, which was influenced amongst other things by a ‘Human-rights agenda’ that had been usurped by insurgent supporters on the political left to weaken its operational capacity, and reduce the government’s resolve to deal effectively with the insurgent problem.⁹⁶ For example, when the FARC escalated its offensive in the mid-1990s, the Chief of the Armed Forces Harold Bedoya, in a speech built on the communist conspiracy narrative that grew with the NSD, explained the need to re-establish these groups:

[...]Colombian narco-terrorists have been able to transform from accused to accusers. In the past they were able to evade the military justice that was applied against them with rigour, and presently they pretend to weaken the military by appropriating the banner of Human Rights and hangout to dry the soldiers that have defended the State and society with

⁹⁴ For one of the major treatises of Vietnamese People’s War, see: Truong Chinh, *Primer for Revolt: The Communist Takeover of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1963). Román Ortiz explains that the guerrilla’s strategic behaviour since the 1980s has been shaped by this Vietnamese type of People’s War. The concept in Spanish is known as *Guerra de interconexión* (literally ‘interconnected war’). Following this concept, revolutionary war was seen as the armonious combination of military and political means. In that sense, Ortiz argues that FARC has always considered negotiations as another front in their struggle. See: Ortiz, ‘La guerrilla mutante’, p. 335.

⁹⁵ Manuel Guerrero Paz, ‘Carta del Señor Ministro’, *Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas* Vol. 53, No. 128, July-September (1988), p.33; General Guerrero’s successor, General Oscar Botero, the last military man to head the Ministry of Defence from 1989 to 1991, followed the same line of thought, and in his annual report to Congress in 1989 said: ‘Subversion has focused on the struggle in the political arena with the goal of manipulating the most representative sectors of Colombian society.’ Quoted in: ‘Informe al Congreso Nacional,’ *El Espectador*, 21 July 1989.

⁹⁶ Minister of Defence, General Manuel Guerrero, disclosed these ideas in his article on the Armed Forces journal: ‘The subversives have appropriated the discourse of “Human Rights,” which obviously they do not respect, to damage the prestige of the military and expose it to local and international public opinion as a repressive force. Unfortunately this accusations have found echo in international organisations and in the qualified media.’ Ibid.

valour [...] If legitimate individual self-defence is founded in natural law, with more reason there is a right to collective defence; even though narco-subversives and their coryphaeus criticise it. Because of this it would be convenient that the legislative branch considers the possibility of re-establishing in the Constitution national militias. They are the most democratic expression of the political community, as they are organisations that come from society itself for the purpose of its own defence, and their member do not lose their civilian nature and become collaborators of the military forces.⁹⁷

Clearly, from what has been discussed, it is possible to conclude that the civilising dimension in the military's thinking has been a powerful influence in moulding the Colmil's understanding of the nature of the conflict as well as its judgements about the value of the use of force. But this influence was not homogenous and shaped the development of the two divergent views about the utilisation of the military instrument. It played a crucial role in the analysis of those officers who promoted other means than violence for the achievement of victory over communism, but also in shaping the totalising mind-set of those who judged that unconstrained physical force was the sole instrument able to defeat an existential threat. This latter vision, evidenced in the statements of General Bedoya during the 1990s, for example, spawned from the conspiracy rhetoric that gained momentum with the NSD. Finally, the civilising mission also helps to explain the consolidation of a rationalist framework of analysis for the military. This permits an explanation for the appeal of inflexible doctrines and the fixation with operational solutions in the context of the ascendancy of counter-insurgency thinking since the early 1960s as will be analysed in later chapters.

A long engagement with limited objectives - The Colombian military relationship with the US

A longstanding historical relationship with the US has heavily influenced Colombia's strategic outlook and its responsiveness to continued military assistance. Indeed, it is necessary to recognise that the association between the countries goes far beyond *Plan Colombia*. 'The

⁹⁷ Harold Bedoya, 'Hacia una política integral de seguridad y defensa nacional. Inauguración de la Catedra Colombia 1 Abril 1997', *Revista Acore*, No. 92 (1997), pp.5-12.

Colombian army has been the United States' staunchest ally, I mean the staunchest. There's practically been a direct line of communication between the Colombian and the US Army,' claimed General Landazábal in the early 1990s.⁹⁸ Such a view may well encapsulate what Douglas Porch and Christopher Muller defined as the 'Colombian military's emotional dependence on US support' during the five decade long engagement in counter-insurgency.⁹⁹ The growth of a shared view within the Colmil that the US has been their main ally in the conflict was produced in part by the historic tension between soldiers and politicians, which reinforced, particularly with the escalation of violence since the 1970s, the notion that it had been abandoned by the government in the fight against the nation's insurgent enemies. The Colmil's characterisation of the relationship with the US in terms of a vital alliance, has undoubtedly placed Washington as an essential actor in its structure of incentives for its definition of ends and selection of means. Washington has been viewed as a basis of political will and resources for pursuing specific courses of action by the Colmil, at times against the wishes of their civilian masters.¹⁰⁰

In this regard, the relationship between the Colombians and the US highlights the importance of interdependency in strategic formulation. In planning a course of action, it is not only necessary to consider the behaviour of the adversary. Depending on the circumstances, if more actors are involved, it will be necessary also to take into account the interests and behaviour of allies in order to advance one's goals effectively. This poses challenges because there might be discrepancies between the priorities of an actor and those of his allies. But clearly, to trace and analyse the development of US military policy in Colombia exhaustively goes far beyond the goal of this research. The intention here is to give a brief general

⁹⁸ Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, p.34.

⁹⁹ Douglas Porch and Christopher Muller, 'Imperial Grunts Revisited: The US Advisory Effort in Colombia', in Donald Stoker, *Military Advising and Assistance: From Mercenaries to Privatization, 1815- 2007* (New York NY: Routledge, 2008), p.181.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

background of the longstanding relationship. This will allow the identification of key themes for a more considered assessment of US influence on Colombian military strategy in the period studied in later chapters.

In 1939, the Colombians welcomed for the first time US military advisors and instructors to the War Department and the Military School, to replace the German military mission that had been active since the beginning of the decade. Ever since, their presence in the country became a permanent feature. Initially, with the objective of securing the Panama Canal and preventing further German encroachment in the looming world war, the US concluded that Colombia could not be neglected and assumed an active policy of military assistance that promptly lured the Colombians to its side.¹⁰¹ Up to the late 1950s, US defence policy towards Colombia was based on the precepts of hemispheric defence, which emphasised the strengthening of the ‘conventional’ capabilities of the military and modernisation under American military parameters of organisation, training and doctrine.¹⁰² Again, the US was focused on protecting the Panama Canal, this time against possible diversionary attacks from the Soviet Union, a mission for which they trusted the Colombians could assist.

For its part, the Colombian army’s participation in the Korean War helped to strengthen the close relationship, and paved the way for the consolidation of a ‘Military Assistance Program’ that secured a constant flow of resources during the 1950s. Moreover, Colombian participation in the war activated the direct line of communication between both militaries, cherished especially by General Landazábal. Effectively, with the escalation of *La Violencia*, the returning Korea war veterans began to utilise their contacts with the US not only to expedite assistance in terms of material, training and planning, but also as political support for their strategies *vis-à-vis* the Colombian government. Assistance by the US military in training had,

¹⁰¹ Bradley Coleman, *Colombia and the United States: The making of and Inter-American Alliance, 1939-1960* (Kent OH: The Kent State University Press, 2008), pp.13-15.

¹⁰² Ibid.

by the end of the decade, assisted the Colombians fairly well in professionalising its cadres. According to a report of the British embassy in Bogotá relating a visit of the itinerant military attaché to the *Escuela Militar* and other service schools in the spring of 1959, ‘the organisation of studies both military and academic, and of practical military training, drawn up by the American mission, seemed excellent.’¹⁰³

As will be analysed in detail in Chapter 4, the priorities of the US towards Latin America soon changed with the advent of the Cuban revolution. Washington then concluded that the region would not be a target in a conventional war, but rather that it would fall victim to subversion. This meant a change in the nature of military cooperation and furthered the transition from hemispheric defence to counter-insurgency, a process that although securing the increase in aid, would also generate serious tensions within the Colmil in its process of strategic formulation during the following years. In essence, the reformulation of US strategic priorities across time towards Latin America and Colombia in particular, and the subsequent change in shape and magnitude of defence and security aid had a decided influence on the Colombian military’s definition of ends and the selection of means in the conflict.

Since the early 1960s, the US offered aid to improve coordination and planning, intelligence gathering, communications mobility and other operational capabilities of the military. Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) were dispatched to instruct and advise the Colombians, while many officers and NCOs were sent to US training facilities, in particular the School of the Americas at the Panama Canal Zone.¹⁰⁴ The training and the prompt availability of technically advanced capabilities in the early stages of the conflict clearly improved the operational proficiency against the insurgents, and were to produce a definite effect in the strategic analysis of the military during the remainder of the decade. In particular,

¹⁰³ ‘Army of Colombia. Code AL file 1201,’ 1959, FO 371/139540, NAR Kew.

¹⁰⁴ Porch and Muller, ‘Imperial Grunts Revisited,’ p. 170.

the more kinetic minded sections of the Colmil were prone to appraise technical prowess as the means to prevail in the conflict, whilst for others the shift to counter-insurgency was understood as a broader political endeavour, beyond the adaptation of the armed instrument to a new *modus operandi*. In this respect, a key US influence for the Colmil was the rise of modernisation theory via the Alliance for Progress. The officers of the 'Korean' school concluded that the conflict had social and economic causes, and hence were eager, not only to transform the Colombian military into a modern fighting force following the emerging techniques of 'special warfare', but also to perform national development tasks as a means to defeat the insurgents.¹⁰⁵ But as soon as the political context that gave rise to the Alliance for Progress faded at the end of the decade, there were no more incentives for assuming a military state-building endeavour, even if it was still considered by the 'Korean' school to be the correct strategic course of action.

Having said this, a crucial point to keep in mind is that the objectives of the US in Colombia at the height of the Kennedy years with the growing fears of communist revolution taking place in the country, were still of a limited nature. In a speech at Fort Bragg in June 1961, which was considered at the time to be a statement of official policy, the President's advisor on the subject, Walt Rostow, made clear that although the US was prepared to offer considerable help, the main burden of fighting would have to be borne by those 'on the spot', the indigenous force of the threatened country. Whilst, for analysts, this evidenced an incipient dilemma, particularly for places like Vietnam in terms of keeping the burden of the fighting upon indigenous forces and meeting the threat of external communist intervention by other powers, in places like Colombia, the strategic situation seemed more favourable. Chiefly, the

¹⁰⁵ Miguel Peña Uribe, 'La misión del Ejército', *Revista del Ejército* Vol.1 .No.1 (1961), pp.18-19.

military and security forces were considered of good quality and the political institutions solid enough which meant that the Colombians could, in principle, handle the problem themselves.¹⁰⁶

During the 1970s, the emergence of the NSD recommended a framework for the conduct of counter-insurgency that inevitably downgraded the state-building narrative for diverse reasons as has been discussed. Precisely, the NSD marked the shift from a population-centric to an enemy-centric approach.¹⁰⁷ In this respect, given Washington's desire to maintain its level of influence in the country and avoid competition from other powers as suppliers of aid, the US continued to offer foundational military training to the Colombians, which still served as the essential operational base for its application.¹⁰⁸ But by then, the extent of the US military assistance to Colombia responded to Washington's own strategic goals in the region, which were in essence limited to those stated at the onset of the 1960s. As Jeffrey Michaels has argued, the nature of US counter-insurgency assistance would remain remarkably similar through the end of the Cold War, and during the 1970s. In his opinion, the so called 'Nixon Doctrine' which was formulated at the time was in essence the continuity of the policy priorities of the US over the previous decade, which was, 'playing mostly small-scale indirect advisory and assistance role in dozens of countries faced with a "subversive insurgent" threat'.¹⁰⁹

The prevention of communist takeover in Colombia would not require the ultimate defeat of the insurgency. Rather, the goal would be to stabilise the country which set the reasonable limit of the effort to basic training, provision of material and military academic

¹⁰⁶ The title of Rostow's speech was 'Guerrilla Warfare in the underdeveloped areas.' For more information on its content and policy implications see: Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: The Free Press 1977), pp.57-59.

¹⁰⁷ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, pp.231-232.

¹⁰⁸ 'Country Analysis and Strategy Paper – Colombia' April 1968, Pol-Col US Box 1992 NARA.

¹⁰⁹ Jeffrey H. Michaels, 'Managing Global Counterinsurgency: The Special Group (CI) 1962–1966', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35:1 (2012), p.58; Michael McClintock makes a similar point to Michaels. According to him 'Political guidance offered by unconventional warfare and counter-insurgency doctrine' from the part of the US, 'would be unevenly applied in the countless theatres of operation over the next three decades, remaining largely untouched until the first years of the Reagan administration.' The tactical and organizational prescriptions of the 1960s remained largely intact despite occasional semantic changes, he argues. See: McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft*, p.228.

exchanges. As the embassy in Bogotá reminded DoS officials at the time, the agreed objectives in the country, as contained in the Country Analysis and Strategy Paper (CASP) for the years 1968-1974, discarded the objective of ‘elimination of the insurgency during the timeframe’ as its main policy goal, and, shifted to the ‘reduction of the insurgency to levels which permit accelerated democratic political, social and economic development.’¹¹⁰ The limitation of the objectives by the country team was due to two factors: first, that the Colmil was considered capable of containing the problem, and could at times inflict damage on the guerrillas; secondly, that the several guerrilla groups could still inflict damage at places and areas of their own choosing where the security forces presence was weak, but that could not take over the country or pose a serious threat to the government. In short, by the turn of the decade, Washington was certain that the continued assistance during the 1960s had achieved its purpose as the CASP apprised:

The Colombians are satisfied that their present tactical military concepts are effective and are moving toward eliminating the guerrilla threat. The insurgency threat is manageable and gives little evidence of having the potential to increase markedly. The possibility that Cuba will attempt to increase greatly its material assistance to Colombian guerrillas with sea and air shipments or introducing of personnel is believed minimal.¹¹¹

Indeed, even at the height of the Cold War, or the ‘drug war’ in the mid-1990s and even in the wake of the 9/11 ‘Global War on Terror’ mantra, the FARC insurgency has not been recognised by Washington as an existential national security threat. In short, through the decades, different US administrations have made it clear that Colombians are the ones who have to assume primary responsibility for the financing and maintenance of their own security. This was the basic assumption of Kennedy’s counter-insurgency policy, as stated by Rostow in 1961, and transcended in time, to influence the formulation of *Plan Colombia* in 1999. Given

¹¹⁰ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Notes on Current Internal Security Situation in Colombia’, 29 October 1968, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Pol 2 Col to Pol 7 Col, Box 1991, NARA.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

the political context and the unique circumstances of the conflict, the only policy option for Washington towards Colombia has been, using contemporary parlance, ‘small footprint’ advice and training teams. Whereas the US army entered into a wide-ranging engagement with the Afghan National Army, the US did not have to build up a new indigenous force in Colombia. The objective of US assistance in Colombia over the past 15 years was, as it was framed during the transition to counter-insurgency in the 1960s, focused on improving clear-cut operational deficiencies of an established and functional military force capable of bearing the brunt of the responsibility.¹¹² As the US Southern Command concluded, the assistance simply aimed for the Colombians to better shape ‘their operating environment to conduct decisive joint operations by virtue of improved training and modernisation’.¹¹³

Conclusion: Themes in the development of Colmil thinking

This chapter has aimed to set out the foundations of the strategic tradition of the Colmil. It attempted to analyse the principal components of its value-system, to explore how they have manifested themselves over the years, and how they consolidated the military’s thought. The themes analysed have been central in shaping the Colombian’s motivational and ideological core. In this sense, they have been fundamental in determining the definition of the ends and the selection of means to achieve them with Colmil’s strategic planning.

However, it is important to note that the influence exerted by these different elements has not been uniform throughout time. The importance of each theme has varied, as well as the interaction between them, depending on changing circumstances in the history of the conflict. Some of these factors could be, for example, the escalation or de-escalation of insurgent activity, the changing political demands from part of the civilian government or the pressures

¹¹² ‘USSOUTHCOM Operation Order for Plan Colombia’, Secret Cable, Excised Copy, 5 December 2000. Accessed via DNSA.

¹¹³ Ibid.

and incentives coming from abroad. The attempt to characterise the defining elements in Colmil thought has also allowed the identification of the tensions produced in the process of their strategic formulation. Noteworthy are the frictions in military planning produced by the evolution of differing, not to say contradicting, views with regard to the utilisation of the armed instrument. With these points in mind, the themes which have been developed in this chapter will serve as the main analytical platform on which to base the evaluation of the way the Colombian military has attempted to carve out its strategy at different stages of the internal conflict.

CHAPTER III

LA VIOLENCIA AND THE ORIGINS OF THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY STRATEGIC TRADITION, 1948-1958

So far the thesis has focused on dissecting the main elements that constitute the Colmil's strategic tradition. In other words, it has explored the themes that have informed the military's distinct understandings of the nature of the conflict, its differing attitudes toward civilian authority and varied judgments about the instrumentality of force. The analysis will now address the evolution of the military's thought through different stages of the internal conflict and assess the bearing these influences have had across time. The following chapter will focus on the experience of the Colmil during the early stages of *La Violencia*, the name given to the undeclared war between the Liberal and Conservative parties that raged from 1948 until resolved by political compromise in 1958 and which left more than 200,000 dead. The general aim is to explore the evolution of various debates about the instrumentality of force that arose as a result of Colmil experience at this stage of the conflict and analyse the influence they would have on the delineation of the differing strategic perspectives *vis-à-vis* the emergence of communist insurgencies during the 1960s.

The official starting date of *La Violencia* is commonly considered to be 9 April 1948, the day when the Liberal opposition leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán was murdered in broad daylight in Bogotá's High Street. A populist and social agitator who represented the left-wing of his party, Gaitán had become a symbol for the rising working class and appeared to be shoo-in for the next presidential election.¹ His murder sparked an abortive revolution against Conservative rule which left the capital semi-destroyed and resulted in

¹ Gonzalo Sanchez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics: The case of "La Violencia" in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p.12.

thousands of casualties. The insurrection that followed the murder of the opposition leader marked the intensification of a violent confrontation between the Liberal and Conservative parties which had been running since 1946, when the conservatives returned to presidency and installed a minority government that began to systematically repress liberal supporters. The situation was particularly difficult in areas where the Liberals had majority, as the 'winner-take-all' logic of the political system produced a forceful competition at the local level for the retention and distribution of power. As former Liberal President Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo reflected, the assumption that it was 'the legitimate right of the victor in the political battle to make of the public administration a sort of booty of war, and carrying the system to its extremes, to prevent the defeated party from recovering its position led to open battle.'²

On 9 April the government of President Mariano Ospina hung by a thread as the liberal leaning metropolitan police joined the rioters who threatened to seize the presidential palace and depose him. The insurrection in Bogotá was only beaten off after the intervention of the army, with tanks cordoning the palace and the prompt arrival of reinforcements, which allowed the imposition of martial law in the city. Military steadfastness at the wake of the insurrection allowed President Ospina to apply far-reaching emergency decrees that included the suspension of parliamentary bodies at the national and local level, press censorship, prohibition of all public gatherings and the placement of more 200 municipalities under direct military rule, granting soldiers full powers to court martial any crime against the state. These emergency measures were to be maintained until 1958. The 9 April insurrection also expanded to other parts of the country, as immediately after the murder of Gaitán, supporters of the Liberal leader took control of radio stations and transmitted confused messages across the country announcing the fall of the Conservative government. As a result, *Juntas Revolucionarias* (revolutionary

² Quoted in: Vernon Lee Fluharty, *Dance of the millions: Military rule and the social revolution in Colombia, 1930-1956* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), p.113.

boards) were installed in various, pre-eminently Liberal, towns, some of them holding out against the army and pro-conservative armed groups for as long as a month.³ Many of the insurrectionists who were able to eventually flee the military's counter-offensive of the spring of 1948 in the regions where the Liberals had great ascendancy, particularly in *Los Llanos orientales* (eastern-plains) and Tolima department in the central cordillera, would form the first nuclei of guerrilla groups which began to organise and expand with the objective of overthrowing the Conservative regime of Laureano Gómez during the early 1950s.⁴

After the Ospina government regained control of the volatile situation in the capital, the violence began to spread in heavily politically disputed areas in the countryside, with Liberal guerrillas frequently attacking conservative armed groups and vice-versa, including burning of villages and crops or staging exemplary massacres. The escalating violence notwithstanding, presidential elections were planned for November 1949. Conservative death-squads using terrorist tactics, attempted in key swing-departments to literally cleanse electoral districts of liberal voters.⁵ Given the complicated security situation, the Liberal party declared that free elections were not guaranteed and decided to abstain from presenting a candidate, a move that assured the continuation of conservative rule for another term. The decision of the opposition party to boycott the elections, according to historian Marco Palacios, marked the start of what can be termed the second stage of *La Violencia*, the closest the country came to a full-fledged civil war. The conflict began to escalate when the authoritarian Conservative party leader,

³ Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ One of the most ruthless groups was the 'Flatteners' of Quindío department, and who got the name after the execution through 1949 of 'plan machete' through which they attempted to 'homogenise electoral districts' by massacring all the male adults in villages that were related to liberalism, mainly labourers of coffee farms property of liberal land-owners as to reduce the number of possible votes for the party and hurt the latter financially. See: Carlos Miguel Ortiz Sarmiento, *La Violence en Colombie: Racines historiques et sociales* (L'Harmattan: Paris, 1990), pp.114-116.

Laureano Gómez, assumed the presidency, in response to which the liberal guerrillas expanded and began an armed campaign to remove him from power.⁶

Gómez, who ruled from August 1950 until his fall in June 1953, returned from exile in Spain where he had escaped after the 9 April revolution in time for the elections. An admirer of Francisco Franco, he continuously mirrored Colombia's conflict with the Spanish civil war. With a staunch anti-communist discourse, he claimed that the Liberal party resembled the Spanish Republicans, who were promoting a communist inspired revolution in Colombia that threatened the existence of Christian civilisation. In his view, this required the Conservative party to advance a counter-revolution through the inauguration of an authoritarian Catholic corporatist regime, similar to that of Franco or Oliveira Salazar's in Portugal.⁷ In this context, Liberal leaders became militantly unwilling to accept the presidential election results and declared Gómez's mandate illegitimate. However, they were at odds as to how to remove the conservatives from power.⁸ While moderate party leaders pushed for further abstention and civic protest, more militant ones felt that the only outlet of their frustrations was to support the organisation of the guerrillas to challenge the Gómez government by force. When Gómez took office there were already 10,000 *guerrillas* in the field, a number that would rise nationally to an estimated 20,000 by the end of 1952.⁹ While there was no official stance by Liberal party leaders in Bogotá in support of the guerrillas, there was certainly no disposition to disavow armed action against the government given the authoritarian nature of Gómez's political project, explains Palacios.¹⁰

⁶ Marco Palacios, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875 – 2002* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p.159.

⁷ John Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia: The Laureano Gómez Years, 1886-1965* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), p.356.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

At the onset of his administration, and despite his belligerent discourse which presented violence in terms of a confrontation for survival against the Liberals, Gómez did not declare war on the opposition party or the guerrillas that acted in their name. In fact, the administration simply criminalised the guerrillas, considering them mere ‘bandits’ that had to be dealt with accordingly. Consequently, Gómez forced the most militant Liberal leaders to exile, and in particular those who advocated strong-arm tactics, while the rest attempted an accommodation with his regime. If anything, the most explicit statement by the Gómez administration about its intentions to utilise force as the main tool to deal with any increased liberal armed opposition came via his Minister of Justice who declared that ‘the democratic institutions, the authority of the President, and the essential elements of order and stability of the State would be defended by fire and sword.’¹¹ In general, while the argument of the communist threat offered a clear rationale for the government’s logic to have the military intervene, this did not translate into clear aims about what the administration wanted to achieve with the use of force. Under Gómez’s Spanish civil war analogy, which converted the liberal armed opposition into an existential threat, was his aim to deliver a crushing blow on the enemy as Franco had done? Or were his aims more limited, and in this sense, he simply aimed to compel the Liberals and its armed supporters to cease violence and accept the *status-quo*?

The criminalisation of the guerrillas, with the purpose of reducing the character of the threat and give a sense of political normality, engendered serious problems at the level of strategic formulation in the conflict. The Gómez administration’s parlance was vague and confusing because parallel to the definition of the Colmil’s function as an internal policing body under the vague notion of ‘public order maintenance’, the pugnacious discourse which defined *La Violencia* in terms of a war of survival meant that there was no clear definition of the goals to be achieved with the armed instrument. This was problematic for the Colmil

¹¹ Quoted in: Torres del Rio, *Fuerzas Armadas*, p.xix.

because from a strategic perspective, by not having a clear political purpose, the use of force, even if proficiently applied, would not serve to achieve anything at all.

After the fall of Laureano Gómez's regime, the Colmil argued that the lack of adequate political conduct of the armed instrument during his tenure was at the heart of the coup. As Richard Maullin, a RAND analyst writing on Colombian military politics in the 1970s, explained, the Colmil's consent to Rojas taking over the Presidency was explained in part by the escalation of hostilities in the first half of 1953. This episode, argued Maullin, marked a shift in the understanding of the Colmil's role in the civil war.¹² It was in particular the officers who were returning from Korea who began to consider the military should stop its attempt to forcefully suppress the armed opposition to the government by acting as a belligerent, but rather that the Colmil should become an arbiter in the Conservative – Liberal feuding.¹³ However, as the chapter will argue, a view that the Gómez administration was mishandling the conflict and that force was being applied indiscriminately, was at the source of more nuanced reactions by other officers who considered that a limited modification of the objectives to be sought by the military, as well of the level of effort required to put an end to the conflict could bring success.

The first section of this chapter, which deals with the politics of the Colmil between 1948 and 1953, will explain the origin of these tensions in more detail. What is palpable is that the concern over the poor guidance of the Colmil appeared in the context of the growing intractability of the conflict in the region of the eastern-plains. Known in Spanish as *Los Llanos orientales*, this region of more than 150,000 km² that stretches from the piedmont of the eastern cordillera to the frontier with Venezuela was the major centre of hostilities during the Gómez administration, as it was the base of the most well organised liberal insurgency that opposed his rule. After three years of continuous efforts to crush the guerrillas, the military effort did

¹² Maullin, *Soldiers*, pp. 60-61.

¹³ Ibid.

not produce any tangible results, violence intensified in other more densely populated areas of the country. This gave rise to growing anxieties over Gómez leadership within the Colmil. However, as will be discussed in the second section of the chapter, the misgivings over political control over the armed instrument served to justify later attempts to change the Colmil approach to one less based on force, and hence, marked the beginning of the debate over the value of armed force that since *La Violencia* has shaped the Colmil strategic tradition.

As a result of the intractability of the conflict with the guerrillas and the ensuing political polarisation in June 1953, disaffected members of Gómez's cabinet and officers of the Colmil General Staff successfully conspired to depose the President. On June 13, Chief of the Armed Forces General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla assumed the presidency with almost universal acclaim and called for the end of the 'fratricidal violence' via a 'subordination of narrow political interests to the higher ideals of national union and reconciliation.'¹⁴ The third section of the chapter will explore the initial policy formulation of the Rojas regime to put a closure to *La Violencia*. It will analyse how aspects of the pacification effort via a National Reconciliation Plan, which favoured less coercive means, impacted on Colmil thinking, even if at the end his effort failed to put an end to the conflict.

Those who supported the arrival of General Rojas to power believed that his role as arbiter would last only until 7 August 1954, when free elections would take place as initially promised. That proved unrealistic. After less than a year in power, Rojas attempted to consolidate his rule thanks to the growing popular kudos he gained by the improvement in security conditions with the early success of his reconciliation plan.¹⁵ So, he began to pursue his own political agenda which aimed at creating a 'Government of the Armed Forces', with a peculiar nationalistic ideology drawn from the figure of Simón Bolívar. To legitimise it, he

¹⁴ Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, p. 214.

¹⁵ 'Recent Totalitarian Trends in the Rojas Administration', Confidential, Despatch, 15 December 1954. Accessed via DNSA.

utilised the Constitutional Assembly which Gómez had created to proceed with his corporatist reform, maintaining many of the ideological aspects of the deposed President's agenda.¹⁶ Rojas' political project was an experiment of military populism, resembling 'Peronismo' in Argentina that ended with the alienation of the civilian politicians that brought him to power, and generated opposition within the sectors of the Colmil who had assumed that military rule would end once law and order had been re-established. Opposition also intensified as he eventually increased the measures of the state-of-emergency, including a more restrictive press censorship decree and the proscription of communism, a move that even Laureano Gómez had not taken, and which translated in the repression of all forms of left wing activism.¹⁷ This marked the beginning of the rupture with the political parties and particularly with the Liberal party, which had played an instrumental role in legitimising the coup, and which served as an intermediary between the regime and the guerrillas to de-escalate violence, as a gesture to advance toward the reestablishment of democracy. Nonetheless, Rojas promptly accused the Liberals of being 'intellectual guerrillas promoting soviet infiltration' when armed groups began to regroup in the country side, and university students began protesting and organising riots with a great deal of low level violence across the three major cities of Colombia.¹⁸

Part of the growing discontent of the Colmil with the *General Supremo*, as Rojas began calling himself since early 1955, was to a great extent related to the mismanagement of the rehabilitation effort, which was understood as a lack of commitment to the execution of a state-building strategy. When the General announced his unilateral decision to extend his mandate until 1962, his continuity in power became unsustainable. By the end of 1956, he had lost the confidence of the Colmil's chiefs who began to conspire against him. Rojas was promptly sent

¹⁶ Henderson, *Modernization*, p.369.

¹⁷ John Martz, *Colombia: A Political Survey*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), pp.177-179.

¹⁸ See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Decline in the Public Prestige of the Administration of President Rojas Pinilla,' 16 July 1954, 721/00/7-1654, RG 59 1950-1954, Box 3285 NARA.

into exile by a Military Junta in January 1957, which ultimately opened the door to a transition to civilian rule. Paradoxically, by bringing together the opposition to his regime, Rojas paved the way for the establishment of a power sharing agreement between conservatives and liberals known as the National Front, which in the end served to put an end to the conflict.

The politics of the Colmil in the aftermath of 9 April 1948 – the road to General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's military coup

Since the events of 9 April, the conservatives had been encouraging the army General Staff to make the Colmil the main bulwark of the government, mainly by stressing the cause of anti-communism which was not alien to their ideological core. The ruling party had been advancing the claim that the murder of Gaitán and the subsequent insurrection was a product of an international communist conspiracy with two purposes. Firstly, to sabotage the inauguration of the Ninth Pan-American conference in which the Organization of American States (OAS) was officially formed, and secondly, to generate enough chaos to bring down the Conservative government. The original official position was then echoed by one of the most important foreign delegates to the Bogotá conference, Secretary of State George C. Marshall, who declared emphatically that the insurrection was 'manifestly Communist, and that the Ninth Conference should continue since the contrary would mean giving in to communism in the battle for Latin America'.¹⁹ Soon after the situation in Bogotá was stabilised, a thorough investigation conducted by Scotland Yard hired by President Ospina, proved that the murder of Gaitán was a private affair.²⁰ As a result, the Department of State changed its position and concluded that the revolt was not communist inspired. In fact, the roots of the 9 April revolt were to be found in the context of the Conservative-Liberal strife, US officials concluded.

¹⁹ Quoted in: Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, p.103.

²⁰ See: 'Scotland Yard Investigation into Assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán; Attached to Cover Note', Non-U.S. Classification, Report, 30 July 1948. Accessed via DNSA.

Nonetheless they stressed that local ‘Reds’ had taken advantage of the chaos produced by the popular revolt to pursue their agenda.²¹ It was in the context of the growing Cold War divide, with mounting anxieties over the Soviet Union’s potential to encroach upon Latin America, that the Colmil commanders committed to the protection of the Conservative government and the need to repress by force any subversive manifestations against it at the wake of the 9 April revolt.

Despite the official enquiry’s findings on Gaitán’s murder and the 9 April revolt, which President Ospina hoped would de-escalate the conflict, rightist militants particularly those close to Conservative leader Laureano Gómez’s corporatist wing, kept looking for a political motivation behind the events. They incessantly fixed the blame on a communist plot directed by the Liberal party to overthrow the government.²² Indeed, this mainstream Conservative interpretation of *La Violencia* as another theatre of the nascent East-West confrontation included a tenuous attempt by Gómez and his supporters to equate Colombian liberalism with the threat of communism. The argument would shape the future administration’s behaviour toward the opposition party, paving the way for increased repression. The goal was to force the members of the Liberal party to submit to the Gomez regime’s will and consolidate the corporatist agenda. In a press conference José María Bernal, War Minister, presented the official position that justified the use of the Colmil against the Liberals that challenged conservative rule, hence, clearly defining the nature of the enemy:

International communism attacks the free world by adjusting to the conditions of every country, adopting the most adequate denomination to accomplish its purposes. In the case of Colombia, at least in appearance, it operates at will under the banner of liberalism. Its members serve the interests of Soviet Russia, financing armed guerrilla groups to overthrow the legitimate government.²³

²¹ ‘Communist Involvement in the Colombian Riots of April 9, 1948’, Department of State, Secret Intelligence Report, October 14, 1948. Accessed via: DNSA.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ministerio de Guerra, *Conferencia dictada por el Señor Ministro de Guerra José María Bernal en el ciclo de conferencias de ministros, 29 de agosto de 1952* (Imprenta Nacional: Bogotá, 1952), pp.11-15.

The argument that communism acted in accordance with the Liberal party against the traditional Colombian way of life, served the Gómez government in its early days in attempting to create a climate which guaranteed Colmil's loyalty to his reactionary political goals. Gómez's intentions in this regard were made plain during his inauguration, when he promised to strengthen the military's position as reward for its unremitting defence of Conservative rule since 1946.²⁴ He stated on that occasion that 'the salvation of traditional culture, and the fact that our nation does not weep under a communist tyranny is owed to the loyalty and decision of the Armed Forces. As reward for such gesture, the people must make sure that its army has the adequate technical means to insure its thorough efficacy.'²⁵ President Gómez's appeal to the Colmil motivational core via the rhetoric of anti-communism was one of the ways in which he attempted to secure its loyalty, as there was a clear recognition by the administration that the consolidation of Conservative rule would depend on the power to repress growing internal armed opposition. Other measures taken by Gómez to secure Colmil loyalty included, for example, the initiation of organisational reforms to promote enhanced government control and coordination of the military; and, finally, an attempt to gain rapport with the ranks by committing to overhaul the Colmil's capabilities. The rest of this sub-section will address Gómez's political moves, and it will assess how they affected the military's understanding of the conflict and of the employment of the armed instrument. Ultimately, it will elucidate how despite these actions, Gómez's conduct of the conflict augmented the political disaffection of the Colmil with his rule and opened the door to General Rojas's coup.

In the first place, the President was putting effort into cultivating the favour of the military chiefs despite the fact that his authority was, in principle, guaranteed due to the established Colmil tradition of non-interference in politics. Taking no risks, though, the

²⁴ 'Discurso de Inauguración de su Excelencia [...]' *El Siglo*, 8 August 1950.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

treatment of officers with personal and family connections with the Liberal party took on the aspect of a mild purge in the first year of the administration. While a few senior officers with liberal sympathies remained in active duty during Gómez's mandate, those who showed conservative inclinations were evidently favoured by the government.²⁶ Up to mid-1952, Gómez demonstrated a high degree of control over the Colmil, which slowly began to fracture as a result of the escalation of the conflict. With no military solution in hand against the rebels, the disenchantment of the commanders with the President's leadership grew. The debate soon surfaced within sections of the Conservative party and echoed by the Colmil commanders over the need to prepare the ground for a negotiated solution, which Gómez was however not willing to accept.²⁷ The President eventually lost the confidence of his conservative allies and of the Chiefs of Staff of the Colmil who conspired to remove him from the presidency.

Nonetheless, at the onset of Gómez's administration, elements of the brutal side of the civilising mission theme, as outlined in Chapter 1, help to explain the initial firmness of a section of the Colmil's leadership in accepting the President's rationale for the use of force. Ingrained anti-communism, heightened by the early Cold War tensions, led military chiefs to consider that they were undeniably in charge of the defence of western civilisation against local agents of an international conspiracy. These enemies posed an existential threat and had to be subdued by all necessary means. This perception gained even more ground in Colmil thinking from late 1951, as a result of several factors. First, as a result of the increased activity of the guerrilla army of *Los Llanos*. This group, it was believed, had the organisation and capability to take control of the region as it had strong support among with the local population. Also it was considered well-armed in comparison to the other groups in the country. In addition, the group maintained extensive connections in neighbouring Venezuela from where it was

²⁶ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, p.106.

²⁷ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, pp.127-135.

receiving material support.²⁸ Moreover, it had a well-developed project to materialise a Liberal revolution in the region and from there to expand the movement nationally. Hence, a second factor explaining the loyalty of the Colmil was the expansion of the rebellion against Gómez to other areas of the country. Early in 1952 the government calculated that there were guerrilla groups of Liberal origin operating in all but 4 of the 15 departments.²⁹ The extension of the problem that year led War Minister Bernal to publicly recognise that the existence of a state of civil war, and thus, called for the initiation of 'a holy crusade for peace to wipe out the scourge of communism'.³⁰ In mid-July 1952, after/following the largest single loss of the army when 196 soldiers and two officers died in an ambush in *Los Llanos*, Bernal stated:

The Communist hordes, or guerrillas or bands of vandals - as they are often called - only understand the language of violence [...] the campaign to end this movement, which attacks public peace, will be carried on relentlessly until Colombian territory is rid of those who oppose order and prosperity.³¹

In this context, the object of the military instrument appeared to be twofold; to destroy the guerrilla groups, and to force the population that offered support to the rebels to submit to the will of the government, transmitting a clear message about the costs of continued resistance. To achieve the latter goal, the government promoted the use of exemplary punitive force, which as Huw Bennett explains, can be characterised as a rapid and harsh response to a rebellion by punishing the general population in order to dissuade others from rebelling.³² The Colmil in *Los Llanos* was already extensively using different sorts of drastic measures in the aftermath of 9 April to attempt to restore law and order. Initially, given the insufficiency in personnel, local commanders were ordered to collaborate with a ruthless auxiliary force of Conservative militants known as *Chulavita*, which was deployed by local authorities to terrorise the

²⁸ Franco Isaza, *Las Guerrillas del Llano*, pp.170-175.

²⁹ See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Factors Affecting Political Stability in Colombia,' 15 March 1952, 721.00/3-1352, RG59 1950-1954, Box 3264 NARA.

³⁰ Minister Bernal admits outbreak of Civil War', *LRX Buenos Aires*, February 16, 1952 Accessed via: FBIS.

³¹ 'Government to intensify peace campaign', *Colombian Home Service*, July 16, 1962 Accessed via: FBIS.

³² Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge:CUP, 2013), p.90.

population suspected of liberal tendencies.³³ Yet, there was a reluctance to restrain the excesses of this force given that it was not under the Colmil chain of command. The actions of the auxiliaries, and the way the Colmil's association with them affected many officers' attitude towards *La Violencia*, will be analysed more thoroughly in the next sub-section.

On the other hand, other initial measures had included the drawing up of population census, rationing and blockades, as well as the issue of a 'warning to all citizens' decrees that considered a bandit anyone who resisted capture, violated a curfew, or carried firearms without proper registration. It authorised summary execution wherever considered appropriate by the officer in command.³⁴ When analysing the works of influential local military thinkers of the era, like Colonel Gustavo Sierra, the use of exemplary force during Gómez tenure clearly bears evident similarities with the British 'small wars' tradition of the late 19th century, despite the lack of direct references to it. For example, Sierra's idea that the use of punitive measures against the population that supported the rebels would force the guerrillas to fight in the open, where they could eventually be destroyed, was already voiced by Charles Calwell in 1896. If the military goal, according to Sierra, was to 'annihilate and destroy the leaders and groups of bandits', achieving it required to isolate the guerrillas from their base of support:

In the hostile zones where the population stubbornly resists the plans of the army, it is necessary to take drastic measures in administrative and military terms. It is convenient to isolate the *focos* of fighting bandits from the rest of the population, and avoid by all means that the latter offer them any support. In this way, the annihilation of the bandits can be achieved promptly in the savannahs.³⁵

However, rather than achieving quick results, repressive measures against the population seemed to play against the Colmil. Additionally, the continued resort to punitive measures during the campaign seemed to respond more to a desire to retaliate than to seek the achievement of military goals. This much is evident, as the level of repression augmented

³³ Puyana, *Vivencias de un ideal*, pp.82-84.

³⁴ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, p.116.

³⁵ Gustavo Sierra Ochoa, *Las guerrillas de los llanos orientales* (Manizales: Imprenta Caldas, 1955), p.78.

significantly as a result of the army's tactical setbacks of 1952. As the report of the 'Commission of the study of Violence' recounted in the early 1960s, for example, Colmil commanders in the eastern-plains retaliated to the ambush of July 1952 by summarily executing hundreds of the prisoners in captivity without any form of trial, and by establishing 'free zones' where anyone who was spotted was to be shot without warning.³⁶ Correspondingly, there was an increase in what has been referred to as Gómez's 'scorched-earth' policy. The Colmil began to demand, through the dropping of airborne leaflets, the evacuation of the areas that were defined as 'free zones.' Resistance from the locals to evacuate was swiftly answered by the invasion of the areas by combined units of army and auxiliaries, which burnt villages, crops and livestock, displacing thousands who had to head to Bogotá or Villavicencio, the provincial capital, or as far as Venezuela.³⁷ Exemplary force not only failed to achieve any tangible military ends. It rather served to increase the population's will to resist the Gómez regime and of the guerrillas to fight the Colmil. In short, given the character of *La Violencia*, the use of exemplary force proved self-defeating. It also was a determining influence on the Colmil's disaffection with Gómez's leadership and the call for a new approach to solve the conflict.³⁸

But, are there other factors that help to explain the Colmil's resort to this sort of violence? A closer look shows that the Colmil's excessive severity amid the escalation of the conflict during 1952 can be explained, to some extent, by the frustrations generated by the lack of concrete results in the effort to engage the guerrillas in battle, the inability to control the territory which facilitated the guerrilla's hit and run operations, and by an overreaction to tactical setbacks produced by this type of *modus operandi*. For officers in the field, 'scorched-earth' expeditions served to punish the population for their tacit support for the rebels. In other

³⁶ Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.153.

³⁷ The execution of the 'scorched-earth policy' is extensively recorded in various histories of *La Violencia* and surveys on Colombia during the 1950s. See for example the works of Bushnell, Palacios and Sanchez and Meertens.

³⁸ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.104.

words, the resort to exemplary force via punitive expeditions in the field was part of the dissatisfaction with the government's inability to match military ends to required means. The fact that the Gómez administration declared it could manage the threat of a well organised insurgency in a massive area like the eastern-plains with just two army battalions and a few air groups proved utterly impractical, which led the Colmil command to consider the necessity to utilise drastic means in an extreme interpretation of *Kriegsraison*.³⁹ On the other hand, the use of exemplary force generated evident problems in military discipline for Gómez, which by mid-1953 became source of anxiety within the ranks that ultimately facilitated his overthrow. General Puyana explains in detail the thinking of some officers and the excess in the use of force committed by the Colmil in the area during the early 1950s, and which deserve to be quoted extensively to illustrate the context:

The Army was losing its prestige and ascendant over the population due to absurd political measures[...] The Commander of the Army Detachment in Villavicencio, of proven political sectarianism, attempted to convince his junior officers that to achieve the pacification of the region the a "*Táctica de la Cuadrícula*" [literally Grid Tactic] should be applied. This tactic consisted in making a grid map of the area of operations, and for every soldier killed, five inhabitants of the respective grid where the incident happened. This wreck less measure was never applied, but demonstrated how many chiefs of the period thought. [...] It was publicised that prisoners were dropped from air force planes. Captain Alberto Ruiz told me that once his patrol was awaiting an airdrop, but when the soldiers went to pick up the supposed supplies what the airplane had dropped what they found were disfigured bodies. [...] The abuses of the army were constantly commented [among the ranks]. We were horrified to know that to confirm successful operations, commanding officers demanded that the soldiers gathered mutilated body parts of the enemy as proof of their 'triumphs'.⁴⁰

During the early days of *La Violencia* there was only one registered case of military insubordination in reaction to the government's handling of the campaign, when Air Force Captain Alfredo Silva, commander of the air group in *Los Llanos* failed in his attempt to take

³⁹ Puyana. *Viviencias de un ideal*, pp.134-35.

⁴⁰ Ibid.; The extrajudicial killing of prisoners via 'death flights' in Los Llanos did not appear to be a systematic practice as was the case during Operacion Condor in the Southern Cone. As documented in the findings of 'Commission for the Study of the Causes of Violence', it appeared to be an isolated practice by rogue officers. The evidence for this practice can be found in the documents quoted in: Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.100.

control of the local airbase in late 1949, from which the punitive actions were being coordinated. His improvised action only succeeded in handing some stores of small arms and ammunition to liberal rebels.⁴¹ A more common situation during his tenure was for Liberal leaning officers, and to a greater degree NCOs, who were barred from service after the arrival of Gómez, to join the nascent Liberal guerrillas, playing an important role in the transfer of military know-how and materiel which aided the development of the insurgency.⁴²

More generally, as will be discussed in the next sub-section, the military demands of the Gómez administration during his first two years in power generated profound tensions, especially for junior officers who had to deal with the coordination and execution of the scorched-earth policy. But these anxieties did not lead to an actual break in military discipline. Tensions were either socialised within the ranks or voiced *ex post facto* in the effort to configure a narrative advocating a change in the military approach, reviewing the understanding of the role of force, to deal with the after effects of *La Violencia* and the growing fear of communist insurgency.⁴³

Besides the attempt to control the military command and appeal to its motivational core – via anti-communism and the civilising mission-, a second facet of Gómez military policy was the attempt to pursue various organisational reforms to increase the professional outlook of the Colmil.⁴⁴ This went in line with his idea of increasing the Colmil's 'efficiency', as he had

⁴¹ James M. Rausch, *Colombia: Territorial Rule and the Llanos Frontier* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), p.218.

⁴² For example, US authorities were concerned that Korea veterans, and in particular enlisted personnel, that had not been retained or properly discharged by the Colmil were being lured by the rebel groups to join their ranks based on affiliation to the Liberal party. See: Albert Geberich OSA to Mr Atwood OSA, 'Briefing Session at Pentagon on Colombia', Office Memorandum, 1 April 1953, 7954.551, Box 3285 RG 59 NARA.

⁴³ Generals Valencia Tovar and Puyana emphasise that during the early 1950s various 'secret' societies and discussion groups, a forbidden practice, were established by some junior officers in service schools and combat units to exchange 'overtly political opinions'. Obviously there is no official record to confirm their actual existence. See: Puyana, *Vivencias de un ideal*, p.89; Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.104.

⁴⁴ 'Armed Forces post created', *Colombian Home Service – HJCT Bogota*, 14 April 1951. Accessed via FBIS.

declared in his inauguration speech.⁴⁵ Of particular importance was the creation of the post of Chief of the Armed Forces (*Comandante General de las Fuerzas Militares*) which, at least on paper, improved the coordination and control of the armed forces. Gómez promoted General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to the position, who had been serving as CoS of the Inter-American Defence Board in Washington. General Rojas was not only promoted because of his status as the highest ranking officer of the Army, but above all, for his proximity to the ruling party.⁴⁶ As Brigade commander in the city of Cali, Rojas had demonstrated his loyalty during the 9 April revolt with heavy-handed measures, including the incarceration of local Liberal party leaders before they moved to depose the town mayor and install a ‘revolutionary junta’, and later by supporting his public order operations with the use of *pájaro* death-squads.⁴⁷

The government stipulated that ‘the Commanding General will function under the direction and supervision of the Minister of War’ and further attempted to clarify roles and functions by stating that ‘the complete management, administration and use of the Armed forces will now be in the hands of the Minister of War. The newly created post will handle the purely technical, strategic and training affairs pertaining to national defence and the Armed Forces.’⁴⁸ The new organisational set-up recognised the Colmil’s received Prussian intellectual tradition, which considered that policy and strategy had definite boundaries. Following this view, this school considered that after declaring a state of war and defining the aims to achieve, politicians should stay aside while the military delivers victory. However, this model view of the dynamics of military strategy in the context of *La Violencia* as in any other war, required at least the definition of aims that could be translated by the military into achievable

⁴⁵ ‘Discurso de Inauguración de su Excelencia [...]’ *El Siglo*, 8 August 1950.

⁴⁶ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, pp.209-213.

⁴⁷ Coleman, *Colombia and the United States*, p.76.

⁴⁸ ‘Armed Forces post created’, *Colombian Home Service – HJCT Bogota*, 14 April 1951. Accessed via FBIS.

objectives.⁴⁹ As it has been stressed, Gómez did not set out his policy with regards to the guerrillas which generated anxieties among his senior officers. From early 1952, this situation lay at the source of the many tensions that ultimately concluded with the *coup d'état* of 13 June 1953.

Gómez's reform of the organisational set-up of the Colmil command clarified the instruments for the formulation of strategy. It defined the levels of civil-military dialogue to develop a discussion of the ends sought and the means required to achieve them. Despite this efforts, his tenure, is nonetheless, considered by the Colmil as one in which the guidance of the military was extremely poor.⁵⁰ Certainly, aspects of the Colmil's misgivings over the lack of political guidance of the military instrument which have, since *La Violencia*, been a defining theme of Colmil thinking, can be traced to this period. For example, evaluating the conduct of the campaign in the eastern-plains between 1951 up to the cessation of hostilities after the coup of General Rojas, Colonel Gustavo Sierra concluded that the Government had failed to define policy goals to guide the Colmil in the area, which translated into an evident lack of military planning. For Sierra, the performance of the military instrument had been 'sterile' as the campaign had depended on 'the will of the tactical commanders of *Los Llanos* to finish-off the problem with any means at their reach'.⁵¹ In this context, the idea that the tactical units did not have adequate guidance nor were offered the required means, also explains the justification in resorting to exemplary force in terms of military necessity. General Valencia Tovar illustrates the point, recalling that the clichéd instruction to junior commanders in the early 50s was to 'act with outmost prudence but with maximum energy and determination.'⁵² According to him,

⁴⁹ A brief synthesis of Clausewitz thinking and the definition of political objective in war see: Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, pp.93-94.

⁵⁰ Álvaro Valencia Tovar (ed.) *Historia de las Fuerzas Militares de Colombia, Vol. 3 Ejercito*, p.150.

⁵¹ Sierra Ochoa, *Las Guerrillas del llano*, p.102.

⁵² Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.139.

this vague instruction only served to confuse the actions of junior officers, which terminated either in excesses or accusations of dereliction of duty.⁵³

As strategic theorists have noted, political guidance of the military instrument is not an abstract concept. Failure by civilian and military commanders to define accurately the role of force can prevent it from achieving appropriate ends, and at worst, may lead to the indiscriminate application of violence.⁵⁴ Under the traditional Colmil Prusso-German outlook of strategic formulation, Sierra summarised the point by stating that ‘the policy the Government should have resolved to pursue in Los Llanos should have been the basis for the Chiefs-of-Staff to base their own,’ and that in the end, the lack of planning had simply ‘translated into a lack of support that led to ensuing conflict, more grave than the original.’⁵⁵

Finally, the Gómez administration also aimed to incentivise the Colmil by strengthening its profile. For this, he increased the military budget by 81 per cent between 1950 and 1952.⁵⁶ This could be achieved, despite increased violence, because the Colombian economy was still growing, thanks to the lifting of international price controls of coffee after the Second World War. However, the Colmil still felt extremely under-resourced given the operational challenges imposed by the multiplicity of fronts to cover, considering the expansion of the guerrilla challenge across the country. As the Chief of the Armed Forces explained to the Minister of War, the military was demonstrating a serious lack of preparedness and training, as well as deficiencies in equipment and weapons when it came to sustain operations, which demonstrated that, in the case of an international war, Colombia ‘would suffer the most shameful moment of its history.’⁵⁷ To complement the administration’s effort, Gómez also

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Fighting for Ireland*, p.183.

⁵⁵ Sierra Ochoa, *Las Guerrillas del llano*, p.102.

⁵⁶ Maullin, *Soldiers*, p.78.

⁵⁷ ‘Memorándum del Teniente General comandante de las Fuerzas Militares para el Señor Ministro de Guerra’, n.d, Correspondencia Señor Presidente, 1951-1952, Box: 275, APR.

looked at the possibility of strengthening the military by building-up defence ties with the US, amid the growing Cold War tension. The President had, since his inauguration, looked for a rapprochement with Washington as he had for long been recognised by the State Department as being overly anti-American, particularly for his early support for the Axis cause during the Second World War.⁵⁸ Through his strong anti-communist stance, Gómez believed that the US would consider his regime as an ally in the confrontation with the Soviet Union. Gómez hoped to improve his general political standing in Washington, and as the ambassador related in private to Secretary Dean Acheson, have the department overlook his undemocratic measures against the members of the Liberal party who had close associations with Washington.⁵⁹

President Gómez's anti-communist sentiment was coupled with his endeavour to please Washington when he expressed the wish to send a military contribution to the UN war effort in Korea. Colombia was the only Latin American country that made such an offer, and the US response was all but immediate. After much diplomatic bickering, Washington finally accepted a naval and infantry contribution for political reasons in spite of the strong argument by planners at the Pentagon that the Colombian forces were of 'poor quality' and that the cost to support Colombia to equip, train, and field the units, would exceed any real military dividends. As historian Bradley Coleman explains, the eventual decision by the US to sponsor the Colombian participation in Korea strengthened Gómez's position with Colmil who saw it as an opportunity to enhance their prestige by fighting alongside modern armies.⁶⁰ In total 4,200 soldiers, roughly 28 per cent of the total available Colombian Army personnel, served in the infantry *Batallón Colombia* (Colombia Battalion) between 1950 and 1953.⁶¹ It is not necessary

⁵⁸ For a description of US Anti-Nazi surveillance and the pressure exerted by Washington on Laureano Gomez and other Colombian politicians accused of Nazi sympathies see: Henderson, *Modernization*, p.273-274.

⁵⁹ 'US Embassy to Acheson', 5 December 1949, 821.00/15-5549, Box 5243m DoS, Decimal Files, 1950-1954 RG 59 NARA.

⁶⁰ Coleman, *Colombia and the United States*, p.83.

⁶¹ See: Russell Ramsey, 'The Colombian Battalion in Korea and Suez', *Journal of Inter-American Studies* Vol. 9, No. 4 (1967), pp. 541-560.

for the purpose of this thesis to enter into the details of the Colombian participation in that war. What is important for the analysis that follows is to focus on the link between the participation of the Colmil in Korea and the conduct of *La Violencia*, in particular on how the Gómez administration attempted to use the Colombia Battalion as a bargaining mechanism to obtain support for his agenda. Later on, the analysis will aim to explain the significance the Korean experience had in eventually shaping the contours of the distinct strategic perspectives of Colombian military thought vis-à-vis the evolving conflict at the turn of the 1950s.

By mid-1952 when the intensity of hostilities in *La Violencia* reached their peak, the Gómez administration began to utilise Colombia's presence in Korea as a way to gain leverage in Washington. One of his intentions was to expedite military aid to improve the combat capabilities of the Colmil to continue waging the campaign in *Los Llanos*. In this sense, the government believed that as the sole Latin American contributor to the war effort in the Korean peninsula, it should receive preferential treatment in the bilateral negotiations of the MAP, the scheme through which the US government planned to supply grant aid to the region in order to collaborate in the hemisphere's defence against a possible Soviet incursion.⁶² Colombian diplomats in Washington lobbied intensely the State and Defense Departments, with equipment requests to fully furnish 13 infantry battalions as part of the MAP. To emphasise his point, the Colombian Ambassador 'stated that the opinion was widely held in Colombia that the United States Government had not treated Colombia as well as she deserved, particularly in view of her contribution to the United Nations campaign in Korea'.⁶³ Throughout the summer of 1952, War Minister Bernal launched a number of declarations which attempted to make an effective case for the Colombian need to obtain extensive MAP equipment to be used against the

⁶² 'Latin America', Secret, Intelligence Report, 31 March 1951. Accessed via DNSA 'Plan of the Governments of Colombia and the United States of America for their common defense', Secret, Concept Plan, 1951, Accessed via DNSA.

⁶³ 'Memorandum of Conversation, by Maurice M. Bernbaum of the Office of South American Affairs' June 6, 1952. FRUS, 1952-1954, 721.56/6-652, Document 264.

guerrillas. The Minister expressed to US officials, for example, that Colombia's requirements for military equipment was of an urgent character, as only military force could be counted upon to deal with the escalating guerrilla problem. To press the point even further, Colombian officials continuously argued that due to the communist character of the adversary and its extreme barbarism, it posed a menace to the security of the Western hemisphere which could not be ignored by Washington. The following extract of a memorandum of conversation between the Colombian ambassador and General Rojas with officials of the Department of Defense illustrates the situation:

[...] the Ambassador showed a classified cable he had just received from Colombia to General Rojas [...] the message reported an atrocity incident which had occurred on 6 September 1952 in which four members of the National Police were brutally slayed by bandit forces. He stated that the bodies revealed that the police had been castrated, and that their tongues had been pulled out and their eyes removed, as well as other evidence of horrible mutilation. The Ambassador went on to point out that this is just one more of many incidents that represent a serious menace not only to his government but to the entire Western Hemisphere. He said that if immediate aid is not received by his country, that in all probability it would be necessary to recall the Colombian troops from Korea in order to cope with the domestic situation. [...] He felt that the U.S government, by being so dilatory in supplying equipment, was closing its eyes to the real issues and that the paltry amount of material involved represented a great deal in insuring Hemispheric security and maintaining the prestige of his country, and relatively little to the U.S.⁶⁴

The point made by the War Minister and the Colombian Embassy in Washington during the summer of 1952, that the question of internal security 'transcended in significance its operations in Korea and its preparations to collaborate in Hemispheric Defense,'⁶⁵ in order to obtain equipment was troublesome for US authorities. Corresponding with his superiors, Thomas C. Mann who was then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, clearly expressed that he 'would like to turn the Colombians down on their request for all of this equipment, since it is pretty obvious that the Colombian Government wants this to "maintain internal order" with all that this implies in the present state of Colombian affairs,'

⁶⁴ 'Memorandum for record: Conversation with Colombian Ambassador', 11 September 1952, RG 330 Defense – ISA Country Files (CAIN), Colombia Folder, Box. No.2, NARA.

⁶⁵ 'Memorandum of Conversation, by Maurice M. Bernbaum of the Office of South American Affairs,' June 19, 1952. FRUS, 1952-1954, 721.5 MSP/6-1952, Document 268.

no matter if that meant the risk of antagonising the Gómez administration who could go ahead with its intention of withdrawing the battalion in Korea.⁶⁶ What is necessary to point out here is that not only was the Department of State not distressed by Communist activities in Colombia at the time, but moreover, it was not convinced by Gómez's rhetoric about the existential threat of liberal-communist subversion in Colombia. For US authorities *La Violencia* was more a conflict between the government and legitimate opposition party which had to be solved by other means than force. Hence, they were more anxious about the intentions of Gómez to convert the Colmil into an instrument for the preservation of Conservative rule by exerting greater levels of repression and curbing political liberties. As Assistant Secretary Mann concluded, 'while we are prepared to assist them to strengthen itself on the defence of the hemisphere, it is not the policy of our Government to furnish armaments to be used against an opposing Colombian political party.'⁶⁷

To pursue their interests, the US attempted to influence Colmil commanders who felt disturbed by Gómez's idea of ceasing operations in Korea, as that would mean losing the opportunity to participate in the tasks of Hemispheric Defense which were seen as an opportunity to enhance their professional military skills. US officials sought to ease Colombian pressures by furnishing, with no further delay, non-lethal material, particularly transport vehicles, and by stressing military technicalities to stress to the diplomats that the equipment going to Colombia under the Hemisphere Defence Program was mainly to furnish anti-aircraft battalions that were simply of a 'different category', and that they were not adaptable to use in land warfare against the guerrillas.⁶⁸ The Gómez administration's handling of the defence procurement negotiations with Washington in 1952 only served to continue straining the

⁶⁶ 'Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Mann) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Miller)', June 23, 1952. FRUS, 1952-1954, Mann-Woodward files, lot 57 D 598, "Colombia", Document 269.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

political relations with the Colmil, which was exacerbated with the disaffection with the conduct of the conflict in *Los Llanos*, leading to the fracturing of the loyalty of the General Staff. General Rojas in a conversation with the Assistant Chief of Staff of the US Army, expressed that he would advise the Colombian embassy in Washington to review its proposal of withdrawing its Korean contribution. If the government went ahead with such decision, explained Rojas, 'it would severely affect the prestige of the Colmil and his personally, as it was by way of his efforts that the contribution was sent in the first place'⁶⁹. General Rojas reassured US officials that 'it was doubtful that the government could justify such an action on the grounds that the guerrilla warfare made it militarily necessary'.⁷⁰

The Gómez administration's desire of using military force against the opposition party and armed groups that supported it to secure its corporatist reform agenda was highly contentious for the Department of State, Liberal-leaning citizens, but also for many soldiers. According to former President Alberto Lleras Camargo who was serving as the first Secretary General of the OAS at the time, the logical outcome of the Conservative government's effort to identify liberalism with communism was nothing other than the proscription of his party from the country's public life, which would lead to the instigation of a dictatorship.⁷¹ Indeed, officers who had family or friendship ties with both political factions felt disturbed at the praetorian role the military appeared to be assuming since the murder of Gaitán. Some Colmil officers recalled that at onset of the Gómez administration, tensions began to appear as it soon became apparent that the President equated fidelity to the state with support for his own

⁶⁹ 'Memorandum for Assistant Chief of Staff. Conversation with General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Colombian Army', n.d, RG 330 Defense – ISA Country Files (CAIN), Colombia Folder, Box. No.2, NARA.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ According to Lleras Camargo: 'The Liberal Party, which governed Colombia for sixteen years, cannot be outlawed or proscribed from the country's public life, and I gravely fear that only this [death of liberty] can be the logical consequence of a crusade, if the effort continues to identify it with Communism.' Cited in: Martz, *Colombia Survey*, p.92.

reactionary political agenda.⁷² Richard Maullin, in his RAND report, noted that Gómez's meddling with the Colmil to ensure that leadership at all levels was sympathetic to his goals paved the way to the eventual break between the government and the Chiefs of Staff, eventually triggering the coup against him in June 1953. Maullin explained:

The politicisation of the army's public order mission disturbed many military men who had previously been able to draw the line between national interest in that mission and Gómez intention to use the military for his partisan ends. Gómez aggressiveness generated tension between the values of non-partisan behaviour and acquiescence to the legally president [...] the politicization of the army's domestic mission finally led to a break between the president and the armed forces senior leadership. Gómez extreme partisanship contributed importantly to his overthrow.⁷³

Antagonism towards the politicisation of the Colmil under the Gómez administration in the terms expressed by Maullin, appeared to be more perceptible at the company and field levels, that is, the second tier of officers trained entirely in the professional service schools created after the military reform of 1907 and who had served both parties loyally, vowing for non-partisanship. 'The army could not be allowed to end up allied with one political party due to the fact it held power', explained General Alvaro Valencia Tovar (who at the time was a junior Captain serving as an instructor at the *Escuela Militar*). By the second half of 1952, when the military was fully involved in an open-ended effort to exterminate the Liberal guerrillas with no clear results in view, the idea that the solution to *La Violencia* lay in Liberal-Conservative reconciliation, not via the application of force in favour of the ruling party, gained ground amongst company level officers who were bearing the blunt of the fighting. However, the implausible rapprochement between the warring parties, given President Gómez partisanship, seemed to pose a complicated political dilemma for Valencia Tovar, and other like-minded officers. 'The growing violence was not a subversive feat that indispensably had to be quelled by force', commented Valencia Tovar, who went on to explain that 'in the opinion of most

⁷²Torres del Río, *Fuerzas Armadas*, p.40.

⁷³Maullin, *Soldiers*, pp. 59-60.

young officers, the Army could not continue following the political parties in their demented march to catastrophe.’⁷⁴

These political susceptibilities, voiced *ex post facto* by Valencia Tovar in his memoirs, might not have been genuine predicaments of the greater part of Colmil junior officers during the period when the conflict reached its peak. However, they serve to elucidate the future interpretations about the nature and dynamics of *La Violencia* by officers, who like him, came to conform to what is known as the ‘Korean generation’. But military frustrations with the Gómez administration’s conduct of the conflict were not circumscribed to junior officers. Anxieties were also evident at the senior level, with rumours of conspiracy becoming widespread. By March 1952 the CIA was already informing Washington about the possibility of a coup in the country led by officers of the General Staff, given an ‘increased [military] dissatisfaction with government policy in coping with guerrilla activities.’⁷⁵ Reportedly, the Gómez regime responded by increasing the purge of senior officers whose loyalty was in doubt, which opened the way for growing suspicions toward the President. The following extract of the CIA report is also illustrative of the effect the lack of tangible success in the conflict against the guerrillas was producing within the ranks:

Despite heavy governmental expenditures for anti-guerrilla action, insurgent strength has increased in personnel, organisation and arms, and has seriously lowered the prestige of the present administration. The government’s countermeasures can be expected to avert any immediate threat, but political instability will continue because of increased army dissatisfaction with failure to suppress guerrilla activities.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the fact that Gómez had increased capabilities thanks to budgetary increases and had augmented the prestige of the Colmil via a successful diplomatic policy that brought it close to the US, discomfort with his leadership was becoming palpable. A month before Gómez was overthrown by General Rojas, the Chief of the Armed Forces continued

⁷⁴ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp. 104-105.

⁷⁵ ‘Latin America’, Secret, Intelligence Report, 31 March 1951. Accessed via DNSA.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

giving public reassurances about the Colmil's commitment to the defence of the government and the tradition of non-political interference. In an interview to the *New York Times* on 15 May 1953, Rojas expounded the concept that the Colmil was above bipartisanship and as such was 'bound to support the Constitutional Government at any cost'.⁷⁷ A fortnight later in a public speech at the *Escuela Militar* he reassured the President that 'the campaigns to divide the Armed Forces will be shattered' and warned his subordinates about the need of 'not losing serenity in the difficult moments the country is going through'.⁷⁸ Yet, General Rojas non-partisan reassurances fell with Gómez at the turn of 1952. The President believed the Chief of the Armed Forces was actually conspiring with moderate Conservatives, including former president Ospina. A pretext arrived in June 13 1953 for Gomez to dismiss General Rojas, which triggered a bloodless coup.⁷⁹ Very probably, as John Martz asserted, despite the general state of dissatisfaction with Gómez's policy, General Rojas would not have turned against the government had he not been forced to do so to save his own career.⁸⁰

General Rojas was persuaded to assume power by his chiefs-of-staff and by disaffected Conservatives, including key members of the Gómez cabinet.⁸¹ In his first address to the nation on the eve of the coup, the General emphasised his statement of principles and some of the aims he envisioned to pursue in government, announcing that the army would take charge temporarily until free elections could take place.⁸² He also promised that the country would

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.124.

⁷⁸ Quoted in: Martz, *Colombia Survey*, pp.162-163.

⁷⁹ The justification for the removal of General Rojas on June 13 1953, and which sparked the coup was known as the 'Echavarria Affair'. In the end of May 1953, allegedly Mr. Felipe Echavarria a prominent conservative business man from Medellin - and curiously a King's College alumnus-, approached a junior officer and informed him about an assassination plot against General Rojas and nine other high-ranking officers. Echavarria was arrested by military intelligence and questioned under torture. When the presidency got wind of the affair it attempted to pressure his release, but General Rojas refused due to the gravity of Echavarria's accusation and alleged involvement in the plot.

⁸⁰ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, p.163.

⁸¹ Henderson, *Modernization*, p.260-263.

⁸² 'Colombian Army Chief Assumes Presidency', Top Secret, Intelligence Bulletin, June 14, 1953. Accessed via DNSA.

honour its international obligations, including the Colmil's contribution to Korea, which reassured Washington.⁸³ Moreover, he expressed the view that by acting as an arbiter, the Colmil could offer an expedite solution to *La Violencia* and hinted towards the need to improve the socio-economic situation of the peasantry to prevent further bloodletting:

The Armed Forces call on all Colombians of good will to form a crusade that puts the country above the parties and puts the common good above the conveniences of castes and groups [...] No more bloodshed, no more depredations in the name of any political party, no more strife among the sons of the same immortal Colombia. Peace, Law, Liberty, Justice for all, without differentiations or preference for the more or less favoured classes. The country cannot live in peace while it has hungry and ill-clothed sons. The Armed Forces will be in power whilst the necessary conditions are prepared to hold clean elections, from which there will emerge a genuinely democratic system.⁸⁴

Rojas Pinilla's coup was greeted favourably and was immediately legitimised by both parties, given its initial compromising terms. Even the CIA reported the coup optimistically, stating that 'Rojas Pinilla's assumption of the Presidency appears to make Colombia's prospects for settling its guerrilla problem, ending the state-of-siege and returning to political normalcy brighter than they have been at any time'.⁸⁵ As it will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, the consolidation of a different understanding about the nature of *La Violencia* that began on the eve of Rojas' coup included the need to reconsider the limits of armed force to deal with the liberal guerrillas, reinforcing the view that the conflict had to be settled through a political solution. But, to better assess the shift in Colmil thinking during the military regime of General Rojas, it is necessary to dedicate the next two sections to the dissection of the misgivings over the military's role in the early days of *La Violencia* and to the debates over the use of force that ensued.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Dirección de Información y Propaganda, *Seis Meses de Gobierno* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1953) p.10.

⁸⁵ 'Colombia Army Chief assumes Presidency', Central Intelligence Bulletin – Office of Current Intelligence CIA, 14 June 1953, Accessed via: DNSA.

‘Public order is not War’: Tensions and divisions over the nature and conduct of *La Violencia* in the eastern-plains

As a result of the 9 April revolt, the Colmil found itself executing two main tasks. One was to take over responsibility from the police or exert military rule in critical towns, which was particularly the case in places where there army was garrisoned and sufficient manpower was available. The other, which was a more common practice, was for units at the platoon level to be dispersed in expeditionary tasks known as ‘public order commissions’ to the most problematic areas, and where there was no permanent military presence.⁸⁶ However, these units had no clear objectives beyond the vague instruction to uphold law and order and collaborate with local authorities.⁸⁷ According to Hew Strachan, peacekeeping or peace enforcement operations are on the whole problematic for armies as the object is frequently not clear, the operations themselves are under-resourced and driven by short-term goals.⁸⁸ Certainly, the experience of the Colmil’s handling the effects of 9 April and up to the arrival of Laureano Gómez, serves to illustrate these general problems. To begin with, once deployed, ‘public order commissions’ demonstrated the Colmil’s severe limitations when defining objectives, planning, and issuing combat orders, particularly given the fact that command on the ground was divided.⁸⁹ Moreover, authority was dispersed, with junior officers receiving incomplete verbal orders to move their platoons far from their bases in response to requirements by the local authorities. The tasks of the commissions were too ambiguous and left too much space for officers in the field to execute it following their own interpretation of the situation or their political judgement. The result was that the conflict was shaped by junior officers, where badly

⁸⁶ Valencia Tovar (ed.) *Historia de las Fuerzas Militares*, pp.150, 157-160.

⁸⁷ These claims are made by Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp.104, 120-126.; See also the comments by US Army General John R. Galvin, who assisted in the founding of the Lancero school: Galvin, *Fighting the Cold War*, pp.73-74.

⁸⁸ Hew Strachan, ‘The lost meaning of strategy,’ *Survival: Global politics and Strategy* 47:3 (2005), p.49.

⁸⁹ Galvin, *Fighting the Cold War*, p.73.

coordinated tactical action defined overall military progress.⁹⁰ The feeling that the Colmil was performing its public order mission, with no plan nor clearly defined purpose, disturbed many officers who were at pains to stress that a change of approach to *La Violencia* was needed. As General Valencia Tovar, one of the chief exponents of this line of thought reflected:

We should ask ourselves, was there strategy at any time [during La Violencia]? The re-establishment of public order was a mission, and how to achieve it required a clear comprehension about what the conflict was about, a methodology, a conduct, a right dosage of the means available, and good tactics once the clash became inevitable [...] While it is certain that the decision about the employment of armed force corresponds to politics, the fact remains that it has to be preceded by a profound study. Could the conflict have been dealt with by other means rather than force? Did the politicians, who at the onset of the partisan violence opted for the use of force, meditate whether it was indispensable to fight? And if they did so, did they calculate if the power available could allow the government to impose its will? It does not seem so. Most probably, the rush to retain political power and the decision to squash by force any source of resistance was taken without knowing if adequate and sufficient means were available.⁹¹

Military anxieties over their mission became more prominent with the escalation of the conflict after the election of Laureano Gómez in 1950. The guerrillas moved to the offensive, with the manifest goal of overthrowing the government, while the latter was committed to repress them by force. Soon the Colmil found itself engaged in open warfare against the rebels. The task of the armed instrument stopped being the maintenance of law and order and became the defeat of a declared enemy in battle.⁹² However, as will be argued, the growing tensions over the legitimacy of Gómez's rule and the confused language of the administration about the nature and aims of the conflict, complicated the articulation of the use of force to definite policy ends.

⁹⁰ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp.120-127.

⁹¹ Ibid, p.126.

⁹² Early in 1951, the Gomez administration's strategy in Los Llanos, according to the description made by the US embassy to the Department of State was basically an 'effort to annihilate the bandits in the Llanos by evacuating the peaceful civil population from a considerable area and killing those persons who remained.' See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Important political developments in Colombia since February 15, 1951,' 24 April 1951, 721.00/4-2451, RG59 1950-1954 Box 3265, NARA.

To better understand the diverse implications the Colmil misgivings with the ‘public order mission’ had for the use of the armed instrument during the early 1950s, it is necessary to start by looking at the operational experience against the guerrillas in *Los Llanos*. The conflict in this region laid the ground for the future divisions with regards to the military approach to *La Violencia*, and which hence was to be a crucial factor the configuration of the Colmil’s strategic tradition. Complex debates about the use force ensued after four years of continued intervention with no tangible results, and as it has been noted, ultimately paved the way to the fall of the Gómez regime.

The intra party strife was extremely intense in *Los Llanos* at the onset of 9 April. The conditions in the territory and the restive nature of the population were defined by a British observer of the time as ‘predominantly of warlike Indian stock crossed with no less warlike Spaniard and occupied for the most part in cattle raising.’⁹³ Further, the region traditionally had ties to the Liberal party, and had fomented the formation of two guerrilla groups along clan lines. Up to the election of Gómez, the guerrillas were acting autonomously as a self-defence force to resist repression from Conservative militias and death-squads, which in most cases colluded with the local authorities. In this context, Major Eduardo Román, Battalion commander in Villavicencio, the capital of the Intendancy and point of entry to the region from Bogotá, had been exercising military rule under the dispositions of President Ospina’s State of Siege decree. Román maintained that law and order could be re-established without the need for either excessive violence or retaliation from the part of the Colmil, as there was no heavy weaponry in the hands of the liberal groups that could threaten the government’s stability at the local or regional level. Interviewed at the end of *La Violencia*, he claimed that by the late

⁹³ W.O Galbraith, *Colombia: A General Survey* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1953), p.23.

1940s ‘there were no grounds for unleashing cruelty and repression, to throw the local population to misery and push them to major rebellion.’⁹⁴

Apparently, Major Román who was transferred out of the region after the triumph of Gómez and the subsequent intensification of offensive operations, did not consider the Liberal guerrillas of the eastern-plains to be subversive in nature. Instead, he viewed them as a commonsensical response to the lack of security and the growing repression by the local Conservative groups. In his perspective, the object of the Colmil was to guarantee security and achieve a degree of normalcy. He therefore did not attempt to crush the rebels and force them to disarm, but rather to agree with them on terms to reduce the levels of violence. He ordered that the public order commissions under his command attempted to reassure the population that the Colmil was being deployed to protect them and not repress them, and hence convince them that arming against the government was unnecessary.⁹⁵ The Colmil could also attempt in this context to address local political and social demands by acting as mediators with the authorities when necessary. For Major Román, this included the maintenance of channels of communication with the rebel leader to show good will, including signing non-aggression pacts and offering safe conduct through the region.⁹⁶

However, in the context of the escalating inter-party strife, particularly after the election of President Gómez in 1950, the conduct of the public order mission in the terms of Major Román was plainly unfeasible for two reasons. First, given the fact that the General Staff was resolutely committed to the protection of the Conservative government, the role of the Colmil was understood as achieving supremacy over a predefined threat posed by an armed insurgency of a communist character.⁹⁷ Second, the order from Bogotá for the army to work in support of the

⁹⁴ Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.140.

⁹⁵ The actions of Major Román are thoroughly described in: Eduardo Franco Isaza, *Las Guerrillas del Llano* (Bogotá: Librería Mundial, 1959), pp.200-206.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Sierra Ochoa, *Las guerrillas*, p.4.

local authorities at the village level in control of the Conservative party, ultimately reduced the possibility of any sort of mediation in favour of the Liberal supporting population. In addition, the instruction to collaborate with the local power bearers also led the Colmil to collude with conservative armed groups that had been organised with the purpose of repressing the rebels of 9 April, and which in many towns had replaced the local police forces which had been disbanded because of their allegiance to the Liberal party. As mentioned, the Colmil's association with these conservative armed groups was a source of grave tension for officers in 'public order commissions', as they were forced to let them run amok by superior orders.⁹⁸ But how exactly did these tensions evolve to affect the Colmil's later understanding of their conduct of public order missions?

It is necessary here to trace the origins of the *Chulavita* auxiliary force. President Ospina had begun the formation of these auxiliaries since 1947, recruiting them from Conservative strongholds because of the suspicions he held about the National Police being in control of the Liberal opposition. The *Chulavita* was expanded during the presidency of Gómez, and it became a *de facto* politicised police force used profusely to systematically repress the population in the areas where the liberal party had ascendancy and where there was known presence of guerrilla groups that challenged his rule.⁹⁹ While by 1951 the totality of the Army's 6 Brigades fielded around 15,000 men,¹⁰⁰ the *Chulavita* auxiliaries amounted to at least 20,000

⁹⁸ As Embassy officials recounted to Washington in 1952: '[...] there have been several signs of possible mutual distrust growing between the Armed Forces and the Government. One is the recruitment and training of a sizeable special police force for the llanos, a fact which the Embassy has been able to confirm from several separate sources. Nearly three weeks ago the government began to assemble a unit of about 400-500 [...] there are two special elements with regard to the present force which have aroused suspicion. One is the fact that, despite being units under direct control of the Ministry of Government, the troops are being outfitted in Army uniforms. The other is the statement by both Army and Police officers that this force will eventually replace, rather than reinforce, the Army task force in the llanos.' See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Factors Affecting Political Stability in Colombia,' 15 March 1952, 721.00/3-1352, RG59 1950-1954, Box 3264 NARA.

⁹⁹ Ortiz, *La Violence en Colombie*, p.40-45.

¹⁰⁰ Russell Ramsey, *Guerrilleros y Soldados* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 2000), p.210.

men nationally.¹⁰¹ The expansion of the auxiliaries generated anxieties within the ranks of the Colmil, as the ruthless methods they used against the rural population appeared not only brutal and wrong from a moral stand point, but counter-productive for the purpose of restabilising the rule of law.¹⁰² Anxieties were manifest among junior officers in ‘public order commissions’, as the dispositions by the General Staff ordered them to collaborate with the *Chulavita* mainly for intelligence collection tasks and in certain instances of lack of personnel to conduct joint operations. The following extract from the memoirs of Brigadier General Gabriel Puyana, who was a sub-lieutenant during *Los Llanos* campaign, deserves to be quoted at length to illustrate the point:

One afternoon, at the end of March [1951], I received a message at the outpost from the commander of the Detachment to return to Villavicencio to be ready to move and operate for various weeks with fifteen men [...] The Colonel then explained over a huge map that the “scum” - that is how he defined the guerrilla – had massacred several families in the vicinity of the village of Tamara. My orders were to march to there with another 20 men he had obtained from other outposts and make contact with the authorities to begin chasing the criminals [...] At first sight I noticed the 20 individuals that the Colonel gave me were civilians, who, I later found out, were being recruited in mass in regions of Boyacá to be incorporated to the army due to their unconditional obedience to the ruling party. I disliked having them under my command, but there was nothing I could do [...] The Colonel was impatient, and once we were in marching formation he harangued us: “The bandits have murdered more than twenty persons in the vicinity of Tamara, and all the people of the region are with them and support them. As a result, from now on, burn down every ranch and shoot any civilian you cross.” I felt disgusted [...] In general, the people of Los Llanos had appreciated the Army, but when these armed militias obtained uniforms and started to patrol with the soldiers, the guerrillas started to attack with no distinction. The government’s slogan of “by fire and sword” had only served to expand the violence, and many senior officers absurdly imposed the scorched - earth policy without comprehending that in this sort of fight nothing could be achieved without the support of the population.¹⁰³

In short, for those sections of the Colmil who understood the public order mission in terms of acting like a neutral force among the warring parties, the demand to collaborate with an overtly partisan force to repress the rural population and turning a blind eye to the havoc they

¹⁰¹ Likewise, the government tolerated the proliferation of conservative death-squads that selectively targeted liberals after 9 April, particularly in the rich coffee growing areas where the lines of partisan divide were less evident,. These groups operated unrestrained until 1953, when the military assumed power and took measures to disband them. They included the *Pájaros* (Birds) in Valle and Caldas, the *Aplanchadores* (Flatteners) in Quindío and the Contra-Chusma (Counter-Scum) in Antioquia. See: Ortiz, *La Violencia en Colombia* p.43.

¹⁰² Puyana, *Vivencias de un ideal*, pp.82-84.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

generated, would have an important influence on their future strategic outlook. This was particularly the case of those officers who were dismayed by what seemed to be the intractable character of *La Violencia* and who in the early 1960s viewed counter-insurgency as novel and enlightened methodology that permitted adjustment of the use of force in order to reduce the disaffection of the population and to win it over to the government's side.¹⁰⁴ In this respect, for many officers, the government policy of promoting Conservative militias had not only served to generate a vicious circle of vendettas but, moreover, alienated the army from the population. 'After 9 April we had been sent to *Los Llanos* to put down a fire, the problem was that we were acting on behalf of the government that had initiated it with its own partisan politics,'¹⁰⁵ explained army General Joaquin Matallana, who served as a Lieutenant during the Gómez era. Matallana would eventually become one of Colombia's most influential 'irregular' soldiers in the mid-1960s, and advocated the proliferation of Ranger type Special Forces to confront the guerrillas with proficient techniques that could 'clinically deal with the problem without alienating the population'.¹⁰⁶ It was in that context that he staunchly criticised the action of the *Chulavita*, as he thought that they 'made it impossible to convince the people of the eastern plains that the military was an impartial force that was not prosecuting them for their political ideology. The local's belief that the government wanted to destroy them led them to defend the region militarily in an almost fanatical way.'¹⁰⁷

The reaction to the ruthlessness of the auxiliaries, which in the mind of many officers had prevented the effective reestablishment of law and order, reaffirmed the need to emphasise a less coercive approach for the management of violence in Colombia. This reassessment of the

¹⁰⁴ See in particular Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp. 128-138.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in: Arturo Alape, *La Violencia, La Paz - Testigos de Excepción*, (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 1985), p.405.

¹⁰⁶ General Matallana's advocacy for 'irregular war' methods is described in: Valencia Tovar (ed.) *Historia de las Fuerzas Militares*, pp.170-185.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in: Alape, *Testigos de Excepción*, p.405.

Colmil public order mission, which surged at the denouement of *La Violencia* after the restoration of democracy in 1958 was influenced in part by the narrative about Major Román's behaviour in the late 1940s, and which turned into something of a myth.

In short, the account of Major Román's stance during the period 1948-50 illustrated for many what should have been the accurate function of the Colmil in its public order mission.¹⁰⁸ The story of his deeds began to be promoted after the publication in 1959, six years after the demobilisation of the *Llanos* guerrilla, of the memoirs of Eduardo Franco.¹⁰⁹ Franco was one of the most notable rebel commanders who did not accept the terms of the amnesty of General Rojas and who found refuge in Venezuela. 'Commander' Franco, had coordinated the amalgamation of the self-defence forces of 9 April into a veritable guerrilla army to fight Gómez's regime and eventually developed a revolutionary agenda with the help of pro-Gaitan liberals who gave guidance to the movement. At the turn of the 1940s, Franco had had extensive contacts with Major Román, and in his memoirs, he considered him an officer with special skills and 'human sense' whose theories on non-violent pacification parted from a correct understanding of the nature of the conflict.¹¹⁰ In particular, he believed that the rebellion of *Los Llanos* had 'objective causes', that is, that it arose because there were legitimate grievances that had to be dealt with by non-military means.¹¹¹ Likewise, Franco also made the case that

¹⁰⁸ The actions of Major Eduardo Román were highlighted positively by 'the commission of the study' in 1959 to argue how the Colmil could behave in a less brutal way than it had done to deal with *Los Llanos* revolt. See: Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, pp.80-86.

¹⁰⁹ Eduardo Franco Isaza, *Las Guerrillas del Llano* (Bogotá: Librería Mundial, 1959).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp.200-206.

¹¹¹ Interestingly, after retiring from the Comil, Major Eduardo Román was hired by the nascent Colombian civilian security service DAS, an agency which combined Intelligence and Judicial Police functions. Román became a sort of guru of special counter-insurgency operations at DAS. Founded after the fall of Rojas by the first National Front Government, DAS became another instrument for the fight against Communist insurgency during the 1960s. In its early days the agency was in great part financed via the US AID Office for Public Safety (OPS). There was an evident competition between the DAS and the Colmil over responsibility for the conduct of counter-insurgency, which ran in parallel to the competition between US agencies over the conduct of foreign security assistance. In this context, US AID promoted Major Eduardo Román to the DoS as critical voice of the conduct of the Colmil who could provide an expedient solution to the consolidation of Communist enclaves via small specialized police units. See: Bogota to AID, 'Monthly Report – Public Safety Division March 1965', 27 April 1965, Office of Public Safety – Colombia, 1957-1974, Monthly Reports 1965, NSA, GWU. For more on the role of US AID and

the conflict had been intensified by the use of Conservative violence for political gains, which generated an expected armed counter reaction from the liberals. This situation implied that the army should not have taken sides, and rather, should have functioned like an arbiter, aiming to protect the population and not applying force indiscriminately or ruthlessly.¹¹²

The mythology of Major Eduardo Román's early experience as basis for the correct conduct of the Colmil in public order missions found strong echo during the early 1960s for several reasons. One in particular was the attempt to generate consent around the 'theory for the deactivation of the causes of violence' that began to be developed by the Army General Staff, and which would become a defining theme of the Colmil strategic tradition.¹¹³ The underpinnings of the theory were found in various sources that became determinant for the configuration of military thought in the period, particularly the conclusions of the 'Commission for the Study of the Causes of Violence.'¹¹⁴ The study of the Commission indicated that the Colmil's actions in the early 1950s led to 'the distancing of people from the army,' and furthermore, paved the way for 'the intensification of the confrontation between the people of the plain-lands and marked the beginning of the scorched-earth land policy'.¹¹⁵

Undeniably, for the officers of the 'Korean generation' that were promoted to senior positions during the 1960s, this narrative served to solidify their commitment to counter-insurgency thinking, as will be discussed in later chapters. For officers like Valencia Tovar, who have viewed Colombia's conflict since *La Violencia* as a situation of a different nature than war in the Clausewitzian sense, the demands for a review of the use of force parted from

the coordination of counter-insurgency activities in the Third World see: Michaels, 'Managing Global Counterinsurgency,' pp.33-61.

¹¹² This argument made by Eduardo Franco was also highlighted by Father Guzmán Campos in his recommendations for the modification of the Colmil's role in the report of the 'Commission for the study of the causes of violence' after the fall of Rojas. See: Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.180.

¹¹³ As mentioned, the actions of Major Román were promoted by the 'commission for the study of violence' after the fall of Rojas Pinilla. See: Ibid.

¹¹⁴ A thorough description of this specific source and its influence on the Colmil is found in Chapter 2.

¹¹⁵ Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.73.

the view that ‘the logic of friend-enemy within the country was an abhorrence’¹¹⁶. This attitude was reinforced by the Korea experience, as many veterans felt they had fought a ‘real’ war in the Asian peninsula as part of the UN effort against the North Koreans and Chinese, and hence Colombian violence was incomparable. Moreover, they believed that the animosity created by the parties was fabricated, and so the Colmil as a national institution should not be weighed against a section of the population.¹¹⁷ As a result of a growing antipathy towards the politicians during the denouement of *La Violencia*, many officers judged that the parties and their patronage system were to blame for the escalation of violence, throwing the Colombian peasantry into internecine feuding.¹¹⁸ In this context, the theme of the enlightened side of the civilising mission started to emerge in Colmil thought, with the Korean school endorsing an idyllic view of the Colombian peasantry as a noble but backward population that had been perturbed and corrupted by the parties, and who had to be rehabilitated to prevent further violence and reduce the risk of falling prey to communism.¹¹⁹

In other words, disagreements about the instrumentality of force have, since the early 1950s, originated from the basic problem of defining what the conflict was all about. Similarly to the British government fight against the IRA after 1969, a main dilemma for the Colombian security forces in the struggle against a myriad of armed groups that have proliferated in the country, has traditionally been the reconciliation of the domestic notion of rule of law, with the need to effectively use the military instrument.¹²⁰ This tension was palpable during the early

¹¹⁶ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.128.

¹¹⁷ See in particular the interviews of General Valencia Tovar and Matallana in: Alape, *Testigos de Excepción*, pp. 397-417.

¹¹⁸ Torres del Rio, *Fuerzas Armadas*, pp.82-85.

¹¹⁹ See for example the essential works of General Ruiz Novoa and Valencia Tovar, in which they describe the Colombian setting as an idyllic rural life that was damaged by *La Violencia* and could be lost forever to communism. See for example: Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.87; Ruiz Novoa, *El Gran Desafío*, p.102.

¹²⁰ Peter Neumann, *Britain's Long War*, p.20.

stages of *La Violencia* up to the arrival of Laureano Gómez to the presidency, as General Valencia explained:

The army was assuming a repressive function, forgetting that repressive tasks should be preceded by preventive ones. More important than re-establishing public order was to prevent its fracture [...] we started to prepare for war, and the fracture of public order was not war. [The political conditions] determined that what we could intellectually do better to handle the situation was omitted. In this diluted and confused conflict, war could not be understood in its classical sense of destroying the enemy, rather, in avoiding him becoming one.¹²¹

The problems in defining the boundaries of the public order mission was particularly evident at the field commander level of the Army. Colonel Gustavo Sierra, who served as chief-of-operations of a battalion sized unit known as the *Destacamento de Los Llanos Orientales*, which Gómez created to spearhead offensive operations in the area in 1952, explained that the government ‘has not been using the appropriate denomination to for the subversive movement, this is not just banditry. That was a step that has already been surpassed by the feat of arms.’¹²² The recognition that the government was facing a well organised movement seeking to use force to attain clearly defined political ends should have served to clarify the role of the Colmil, according to officers like Sierra. He went on to define the character, goals and methods of the adversary as follows:

The end goal of the subversive moment is well defined. It seeks to achieve a change of the legitimate internal political order by force, and adopts means that allows it to avoid committing to a formal war. These are common methods used by Communism in many countries, and in this concrete case in the Colombian eastern-plains [...] in the past months Communism has used the tactic of guerrilla warfare in the eastern-plains in combination with other elements in a defined and structured way. The subversive movement has been ascending, reaching a peak in the second semester of 1952. The correct means to repress the subversion have not been applied to date, like the employment of anti-guerrilla methods, as the circumstances advice.¹²³

Despite being aligned with the spirit of the Conservative counter-reaction to 9 April which Gómez had headed, many senior officers believed the President’s leadership had been incoherent and had failed to effectively configure policy ends to guide the actions of the armed forces. By the end of 1952 they felt the military campaign had stalled. Even if the guerrilla

¹²¹ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.144.

¹²² Sierra Ochoa, *Las guerrillas*, p.6.

¹²³ Ibid, pp.8-10.

army of *Los Llanos* did not count with the necessary capabilities to realistically challenge the Colmil, any attempt by the later to defeat them seemed futile due to the extension of the territory, the unwavering support the rebels received from the locals, and the inability of the government to strengthen an overstretched army, among other reasons. In this respect, senior officers interpreted that the lack of guidance amounted to a feeble commitment from the Government to achieve a military solution to the conflict which it had appeared to demand in the first place.¹²⁴ This was particularly so as there was no proportion between the extension of the area of operations and the commitment of means by the government. ‘The efforts of the army have been lost completely, order was not re-established [...] the number of *guerrilleros* augmented considerably because of the lack of decision and planning from our political leadership,’ explained Sierra.¹²⁵

It is necessary here to make a small diversion and explain in detail the work of Colonel Sierra. After his experience in the eastern-plains, Sierra authored the book *Las Guerrillas de los Llanos Orientales*, which was a combination of a memoir recalling his experience in the campaign, with and assessment of what he considered were the fundamental military flaws that prevented the Colmil from dealing with the problem. These reflections served as basis to promote lessons in the second part of the book to inform the response to the resurgence of bandit groups and the perceived threat of communist insurgency after 1955. Similarly to those analysts of the Malayan Emergency who misinterpreted Sir Robert Thompson’s book

¹²⁴ For example, a US Embassy telegram reported about possible negotiations between the government and the guerrillas the following thoughts of the Colmil: ‘According to reports which have reached the Embassy, a number high Army officers were incensed at the gesture of friendliness towards a bandit chief who had been responsible for the deaths of dozens of Colombian soldiers. In general, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in Army officer ranks during late December and all of January, caused by the so called “soft attitude” which the government had adopted during that period toward the guerrillas.’ See: US Embassy to DoS, ‘Factors Affecting Political Stability in Colombia,’ 15 March 1952, 721.00/3-1352, RG59 1950-1954, Box 3264 NARA.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Defeating Communist Insurgency as a factual history of the campaign,¹²⁶ Colombian authors have done with Sierra's book, quoting him liberally to recount the actions of Colmil in the eastern-plains campaign. A closer reading, however, reveals that the narrative is more of a generalisation and a repository of lessons learned; hence it has to be treated with care as an accurate historic record. For the purposes of this thesis, which focuses on how events have been interpreted, in particular by military practitioners in Colombia in an effort to trace the evolution of their thought, Sierra's work is useful for two reasons. First, as it allows us to trace themes that informed Colmil behaviour during *La Violencia*, especially on issues of political guidance and the organisation of the armed instrument. Secondly, it aids in contextualising the Colmil's motivational patterns since the late 1950s, which was shaped as reaction to the use of the armed instrument during the Gómez administration.

In this respect, for a sector within the Colmil which did not align with the political project of Gómez or his anti-communist discourse to explain the military's role in *La Violencia*, the lack of political guidance was read as a lack of adequate reasoning over the exact nature of the conflict and an inadequate judgement over where the balance between means and ends laid. This was in particular the perspective of those officers, like Valencia Tovar or Puyana, who understood *La Violencia* as a situation that required a more refined understanding about the use of force by the Government and the military command. In other words, the interpretation of the nature and dynamics of the guerrilla phenomenon under a different light by these officers - that is, less affected by ardent anti-communism, altered the grounds upon which the judgement about the utility of force had to be made. At least in principle, this meant that the government should start to calculate the use of force in parallel with other non-military means. The configuration of Colmil thinking under these conditions became more consistent for field grade

¹²⁶ Indeed, according to military historian David French, Sir Robert Thompson's work is not a history of the Malaya campaign per se, but rather an aspirational treaty on how to wage effective counter-insurgency. See: David French, *The British Way in Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp.206, 247-248.

officers as a result of the experience during the military government of General Rojas Pinilla. As expected, during Rojas' rule the Colmil acquired *de facto* non-combat roles that stimulated the assumption that the pacification of the country was not attainable solely by the use of force.

A change in the approach to *La Violencia* –General Rojas' National Reconciliation Plan

General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla assumed the Presidency on 13 June 1953 with the intention of offering a political solution to *La Violencia* rather than a military one. His stated goal in the wake of the coup was to cease the Liberal-Conservative confrontation through the promotion of a National Reconciliation plan that aimed at a multiparty cessation of hostilities, and later, the rehabilitation of victims and former fighters.¹²⁷ With the Colmil acting as guarantor, it was assumed that these two actions would prepare the ground for a political agreement between both parties and the reestablishment of democracy. In this sense, the first step was to issue a decree (No.1546 of 14 June 1953) that offered general amnesty to all those involved in violent actions since 1946, whether Liberal guerrillas or members of Conservative paramilitary groups.¹²⁸ Following this, the *Chulavita* auxiliaries and the local police forces, which were considered to be a main obstacle to the Colmil's pacification effort, were disbanded to facilitate the creation of a nonpartisan National Police service which although civilian in character would be administered by the Ministry of War and hence under direct operational control of the Colmil.

The amnesty decree not only established the procedures and requirement for the combatants to apply, but most significantly established that Colmil commanders in their regions of responsibility had to establish military tribunals, effectively placing them in complete control

¹²⁷ 'Colombian Army Chief Assumes Presidency', Top Secret, Intelligence Bulletin, June 14, 1953. Accessed via DNSA.

¹²⁸ Gonzalo Canal Ramírez, *El Estado Cristiano y Bolivariano del 13 de Junio de 1953* (Bogotá: Editorial Antares, 1953), p.177.

of the administration of the amnesty and pardon procedures.¹²⁹ The amnesty, explained an observer, was conditional only in demanding that those who surrendered brought along their weapons, swear to give up warlike activities and returned to their former occupations.¹³⁰ Conversely, the view that it was the Colmil's prerogative to settle the terms of the amnesty led many rebels to consider it as a non-negotiable imposition which clarified their alternatives to the simple choice of accepting the laying down of arms or risking the threat of increased military pressure. These points help to illustrate the challenges the policy faced in its early days, as well as to explain the reallocation of the effort towards state-building via the rehabilitation phase of the plan. The promise of rehabilitation served to arrange a mode of compliance that did not appear too submissive to the guerrillas and dissipated doubts among the demobilised about the regime's willingness to pacify without resort to force.¹³¹

A few days after the coup an extensive propaganda campaign was initiated, with Colombian air force planes dropping thousands of leaflets announcing the fall of Gómez, and radio announcements extending guarantees of free transit to all the *guerrilleros* who presented themselves to army outposts to apply for the amnesty.¹³² By these means, less than two months after Rojas announcement, almost 4,000 men accepted to lay down their arms.¹³³ Immediate results were achieved mainly in the regions of Antioquia and parts of Tolima where the 'Peace, Law, Liberty, Justice for all', slogan of Rojas not only had been positively received by most of the guerrillas, but also because the Liberal party had demonstrated ascendancy over the rebel leadership which secured compliance with the terms imposed by the Colmil. The initial success of the amnesty, was also related to the fact that Rojas stressed his non-partisanship as a soldier, and thus, liberal rebels who hardly would have trusted an offer of amnesty from a politician,

¹²⁹ Maullin, *Soldiers*, pp.61-62.

¹³⁰ Martz, *Colombia survey*, p.177.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Henderson, *Modernization*, p.201.

¹³³ Ibid.

were prepared to give the military the benefit of doubt.¹³⁴ In principle, the guarantees voiced by the Colmil that the amnesty would include a pardon to allow a fresh start to those who applied, as well as assurances that they would protect their lives after they disarmed allowed Rojas to empathise with the guerrillas. Following Schelling's analysis on the logic of bargaining, the amnesty allowed to design a suitable environment to influence the decision to lay down their arms.¹³⁵

The application of the amnesty was, for its part, not that swift in *Los Llanos*. As the major centre of hostilities during the Gómez years it had developed its own dynamics and characteristics that were less responsive to Rojas *paix de braves* proposition. The main issue was that the behaviour of the guerrilla leadership in the region was less malleable, as their goals and interests did not correspond with the spirit of Rojas reconciliation agenda for various reasons. Firstly, after three years of bitter fighting, along with the use of widespread repression, it was extremely difficult to restructure the situation to create sufficient trust to influence the decisions of the rebels. Secondly, the guerrilla movement had expanded considerably and had adopted an autonomous agenda from 1952, with only tenuous links with the Liberal party, which for commanders like Eduardo Franco had abandoned the leftist ideas of Gaitan.¹³⁶ This meant that the Liberal leadership could not influence the guerrillas on behalf of Rojas because the fall of Gómez did not automatically mean the termination of the guerrilla's *raison d'être*. Consequently, the section of the insurgent movement under Franco felt that the successes of their campaign in the spring of 1953 could allow the transit from a guerrilla war to a positional one and to develop their political project nationally to pursue a veritable 'Gaitanista'

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Schelling, *Choice and consequence*, p.206.

¹³⁶ See: Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, pp.175-176.

revolution.¹³⁷ In this context, the *Llanos* guerrilla had little reason to give up their fight and accept in full the amnesty terms, as Eduardo Franco commented in a letter to his deputy:

[...]Peace is necessary, but a peace to win rights and restitutions. A peace that we have won justly with blood, to rise the people and restore the liberal camp. The best for now is to retreat most of our group without making much noise, a ceasefire for as long as it is possible and to wait patiently for the events to unfold, that is, until a new betrayal comes to light as it has happened before so many times. Then the people will figure it out and will search for the mountains. The rebellion will return and we will be waiting for them with our arms open ready to continue the struggle. Sadly the army has stolen our banners and is dragging the people behind it. What an irony. But as I say, sooner or later our time will come, the truth will come to light and the usurpation will fall. Revolution is fashionable in the whole world these days, and needless to say, I am fully committed to it [...] Let's have a pause and later inevitably back to the arena, we can use the amnesty for this. But we must be prepared, as peace with no provisions is not safe.¹³⁸

The situation in *Los Llanos* also revealed that despite the reconciliatory tone of Rojas coup, disparate perceptions of the conflict persisted within the Colmil that shaped their understanding of the amnesty as a solution to the conflict. When Rojas assumed the presidency the chain of command was not fractured. After removing key senior General officers who the day of the coup had remained loyal to President Gómez, Rojas went on to respect the seniority system of promotion admittedly not to alienate operational commanders. These circumstances, recounts Valencia Tovar, led to the promotion to the posts of Chief of the Armed Forces and Army CoS of two officers with very different beliefs about the solution to the insurgency problem in the area. In Valencia Tovar's opinion, the new Chief Brigadier General Alfredo Duarte Blum had a conciliatory and pragmatic character that from the Korean perspective made him 'the General officer that better understood the national situation and the way to produce the demobilization of the guerrillas.'¹³⁹ In contrast his junior, the Army CoS Brigadier General Pedro Muñoz, who had served in the area as operational commander, believed that the military odds were in the Colmil's favour and so 'was staunchly in favour of repression as he was convinced the

¹³⁷ Alfredo Molano, *Amnistía y violencia* (Bogotá: CINEP – Serie Controversia N° 86-87, 1978), p.18.

¹³⁸ Quoted in: Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, pp.175-176.

¹³⁹ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.312.

insurgency could be squashed with no need for compromise.’¹⁴⁰ This ‘conceptual abyss’, as Valencia Tovar referred to it, led to different interpretations of the rationale of the amnesty, and which were only solved when Rojas intervened in favour of the assessment of Chief of the Armed Forces Duarte who eventually had to deploy all his political skills to secure guerrilla compliance with the amnesty. These tensions, Valencia Tovar recalls, were certainly visible in the early negotiations with the guerrilla leadership.¹⁴¹

As stipulated in the amnesty decree, Army CoS Munoz had guaranteed the guerrillas a cease-fire pending the outcome of the proceedings of the military tribunals handling their cases if they surrendered their weapons to the Colmil. However, this was not enough of for the guerrilla negotiators, who felt the terms, particularly of disarming with no consideration of negotiations on fundamental issues of national policy amounted to a demand of unconditional surrender underpinned by the threat of further use of force. These misgivings can be observed in a telegram to the General in which the negotiators complained about the attitude of the Army CoS and his delegates handling of the proceedings:

Lt Gen Rojas: we communicate to your Excellency that we held a conference at Puerto Carreno on national pacification with your military delegates. Military attitude frankly contrary to postulates of your Excellency. Hostility, threat, coercion precisely expressed. Dictatorial imposition. Complete rejection of our propositions. We hope your Excellency allow us to ventilate our positions of loyalty, peace, liberty, justice, and work that are consistent with your highest purposes.¹⁴²

From the extract above, it is somewhat clear that Colmil commanders, like Brigadier General Munoz revealed a basic understanding of the notion of bargaining through coercion in an attempt to induce the rebels to accept the terms. But given the character of the conflict in *Los Llanos*, the guerrillas’ view of their own situation and of the Colmil’s limitations in the area, the threat of further military pressure proved vain even if various senior officers believed otherwise. In particular, given that ‘coercion depends more on threat of what is yet to come

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Quoted in: Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, p.190.

than on damage already done,'¹⁴³ the apparent limitations of the armed instrument in the battlefield in the late spring of 1953 reduced the credibility to the threat. Moreover, given the behaviour of the Rojas in the wake of the coup and the value he put in the idea of reconciliation, it could have induced them to believe the General did not have the ability or the will to step up military pressure. One could consider that the threat of continued military action in the region might have put at risk Rojas' early political position which rested on the promise of stopping further bloodletting. In this sense, the effective application of the amnesty in *Los Llanos* required a more accommodating approach on the part of the Rojas regime, and an attempt to tease out common ground with the guerrillas. This materialised to a great extent via an overt commitment by Brigadier General Duarte Blum to finding a negotiated settlement, after Rojas sent him to Villavicencio to deal with the amnesty proceedings in person and who communicated that the administration's rehabilitation effort was none other than broad social programme that would generate material prosperity for the local population, a discourse which in principle had a strong appeal with the base of the rebel movement.¹⁴⁴

In September 1953, General Duarte named his protégé Colonel Alberto Saiz Montoya to the position of Civil-Military Chief of *Los Llanos*. He was given widespread administrative authority and allowed to engage in a more open-ended political bargaining with the guerrilla leadership to generate incentives for their demobilisation and cooperation with the Colmil authority. Colonel Saiz emphasised during the negotiations that the Rojas administration effectively marked a 'new dawn' for the eastern plains. He explained to the guerrillas that the times of excessive repression via scorched-earth land measures were over, and that the civil-military command's purpose was not only to protect the population to restore a semblance of order, but primarily to deal with their needs delivering public service goods that could foster

¹⁴³ Schelling, *Arms and influence*, p.172.

¹⁴⁴ Fluharty, *Dance of the Millions*, p.250-254.

the conditions for achieving what he termed as ‘social peace’.¹⁴⁵ The proceedings of the amnesty meetings with the guerrillas showed the multiple demands that were voiced. These demands were in effect accepted by the Colmil, who committed to address them in exchange for the cessation of hostilities. This stance was highlighted in one of the joint declarations drafted between the Colmil and the guerrillas:

[The object of the meeting] is to attend to the requests and problems faced by the guerrillas. The following petitions, and which are considered of vital importance, were made to the government with the interest of achieving and maintaining peace in *Los Llanos*. First, the establishment of health posts and financial or other money lending institutions for peasants. Second, that money is borrowed to the peasantry without many restraints, and that access to machinery, tools and agricultural supplies is increased. Third, that road building and electrification plans are intensified. Fourth, that military authorities in the region act impartially, and that a way to terminate the persecution of liberals in regions affected by violence is studied. Finally, that the military authorities in the region use their means to prevent the arrival in Los Llanos of armed elements denominated as *pájaros* that generate a state of anxiety [...]¹⁴⁶

In the short term, it is clear that the change of approach was successful because it enticed a great part of the Llanos guerrillas to accept the terms of the amnesty, beginning its definite disintegration. According to one of Saiz’s reports, by 25 September 1953 almost 1,474 guerrillas had decommissioned their weapons and were returning to their villages. The number rose to 10,000 by mid-1954 when the instruments of the rehabilitation programme were officialised and money began to flow to the region. In particular, the materialisation of the amnesty was a blow for the most ideological leaders like Franco, who began to lose control of his men and was eventually forced to flee from the region.

The Colmil derived genuine popular kudos as a result of the massive demobilisation of guerrilla fighters and its effect in reducing the levels of violence nationwide at the turn of 1954. This allowed General Rojas to consolidate his hold on power. However, as the final part of this

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Proceedings – Meeting celebrated between the guerrillas and military authorities in San Pedro de Arama, Intendancy of Meta’, 4 September 1953. Quoted in the appendix of: Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, n.p.

section will discuss, in the long-term both the amnesty and the rehabilitation agenda that followed were not successful in bringing about the end of the violence in various regions as the internal conflict soon regained new strength. This was particularly the case in the rich Coffee growing region of the Central Andes, which soon became the main trouble spot for the Colmil with the explosion of banditry after the failure of the amnesty.

What is important to note, is that at least in principle, the recognition of the grievances of the Liberal guerrillas at the start of the Rojas regime confirmed the views of higher echelons of the Colmil in their belief that the failures of previous governments and the absence of material progress were the main motors of rebellion. This led to the emergence of the idea that the provision of economic development and social progress by means of proficient technocratic administration that disregarded the vices of partisan politics, alongside a determined use of force to offer population security, was the solution to violence. For example, the recently promoted Brigadier General Gustavo Sierra Ochoa, who was named by General Rojas Military Governor of the department of Caldas, the axis of the coffee producing region of Colombia, synthesised the view during his inauguration speech:

It is necessary that the functions and tasks of all civil servants are technified, up to the point that the organisation of an army can be imparted to public service [...] The military government should move from an “electoral mentality” to an “enterprise mentality”. To save the Fatherland of the ruin of violence is the military government’s historic mission. And this mission extends to multiple requirements that go from the need for public order to an intense administrative service.¹⁴⁷

Enlightened military rule, it was believed, could achieve the rapid material progress of the population by promoting industrialisation, road building and public works. In particular, the convergence of the influences of the state-building narrative and the civilising mission were clearly perceptible in this change of attitude, which reduced the politics of the conflict to a question of virtuous administration. ‘To the State falls today a greater responsibility than in the past,’ explained Rojas, ‘because its mission is through righteous policies to assure the equitable

¹⁴⁷ Gustavo Sierra Ochoa, *Una política. Discursos y alocuciones*. (Manizales: Imprenta Departamental de Caldas, 1953), p.75.

distribution of riches in accordance with the teachings of the Pontifices and Christian thinkers for whom the beginning and end of all economic activity is man and his transcendent destiny.’¹⁴⁸ But one can ask, was this ideological basis a guide for effective strategic formulation to deal with *La Violencia*? Most certainly it was not, as they were simple generalisations about Christ and Simon Bolívar, religion and fatherland. They were too vague to define the mission of the regime, and possessed scant consistency to be translated into a workable course of action as to how the Colmil could be employed to achieve the cessation of the conflict.

The characteristics of this military attitude also corresponded with what commentators of the period referred to as a ‘new Latin American militarism,’ that in their opinion was attempting to resolve the economic backwardness and political inequalities of the region. For example, Edwin Liuwen of the Council of Foreign Relations considered the region’s military rulers during the 1950s to be reform minded individuals who ‘played antidespotic political roles, intervening to terminate tyranny of one of their own errant colleagues or to supply correctives to the excess of civilian politicians’.¹⁴⁹ In a similar vein, the US consul in Medellin, Vernon Lee Fluharty, who after leaving Colombia became a staunch defender of Rojas and published a detailed study of his regime – conveniently published in 1957 when the then unpopular dictator was in need of publicity abroad – explained that the termination of *La Violencia* required the General to manage ‘the social revolution of 9 April’, via strenuous administrative efforts to secure ‘greater economic democracy for the masses’ against the ‘oligarchy’ that had ruled the country. ‘Perhaps the knottiest problem that Rojas has to face,’ Fluharty wrote, ‘is that of elevating and integrating the peasant and the small freeholder into the national life. The

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in: Martz, *Colombia survey*, p.182.

¹⁴⁹ Liuwen, *Arms and Politics*, pp.137-139.

complex sequel of evils that deprive too many men of land and keep others in de facto serfdom must be broken up to achieve this.’¹⁵⁰

To spearhead his rehabilitation plan Rojas founded two institutions: the ‘National Secretariat for Social Assistance’ and the ‘Institute for Colonisation and Immigration’, with the object to formalise the guarantees offered to the demobilised guerrillas and attend to their families as well as the numerous peasants that had been declared as victims of ‘official Conservative violence’.¹⁵¹ Initially, this translated in the requirement of resettling almost 5,000 displaced persons who had escaped their places of origin and execute social and welfare programmes as well as initiatives of infrastructure development.¹⁵² The ‘National Secretariat for Social Assistance’, known by its acronym SENDAS, was a civil-military agency that had the task of diminishing material poverty and inequality in order to reduce the incentives of those engaging in violence and increase collaboration with the military regime.¹⁵³ In its first report on the situation, SENDAS established that at least 33.9 per cent of territory had been affected by *La Violencia*, including the destruction of 40 towns and 30,000 homes. It had received in its first six months more than 26,000 petitions for restoration of property to its lawful owners.¹⁵⁴ However, SENDAS in the end proved a fiasco as an instrument of pacification. While it succeeded in delivering basic aid to the population in many of the violence prone areas, it utterly failed in dealing with the majority of cases of property restoration and executing the rebuilding promises.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, it increased political opposition to the military regime. ‘It was becoming the norm at each inauguration of new highway, school, or clinic to see a military chief preaching the virtues of the ‘pueblo-armed

¹⁵⁰ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.216.

¹⁵¹ Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia*, p.366.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.110.

¹⁵⁵ Gonzalo Sánchez, ‘The Violence: An Interpretative Synthesis,’ in Charles Bergquist, et. al, *Violence in Colombia*, p.101.

forces alliance,’ writes Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez. ‘In a country where the virtues of the spoils system was deeply rooted and helped to ensure the monopoly of the two traditional parties, this development clearly threatened the elite.’¹⁵⁶

In part, a reason for the inability to execute the rehabilitation tasks in many of the regions was the product of the intense competition for the resources of SENDAS by Colmil brigades. Brigade Commanders (as a rule Colonels) had to be able to lobby for their areas of responsibility, demonstrating they were ‘zones highly affected by violence’ to be able to receive enough financial resources.¹⁵⁷ Historian Cesar Torres del Río has argued that despite the government’s rhetoric about proficient and technical based public administration and the Colmil CoS order to avoid ‘political contamination’ when assigning resources notwithstanding, successful commanders were the most politicised ones. Particularly successful in initiating rehabilitation programmes were those who served in the departments where Rojas had named loyal general officers who became ‘godfathers’ of the Brigades and offered more access to the regime’s coffers to create local political clientele.¹⁵⁸

For its part, the creation of the ‘Institute for Colonisation and Immigration’ resulted from Rojas’ wish to recover the original 1930s mission of the Colmil as it fitted with the state-building narrative his regime developed. The Institute was to be in charge of planning the government’s policy for the economic exploitation and distribution of uninhabited land, and placed the onus of the army for the fulfilment of the task. ‘From now on the military is a coloniser’ announced the General at the inauguration of the institute in September 1953, ‘no more deserted extensions of land, but inhabited ground, controlled and *colombianised*.’¹⁵⁹ One of the executive officers of the Institute explained for example, the need of organising a

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Cesar Torres del Río, *Fuerzas Armadas*, p.56.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ See: Rubén Rueda, ‘Colonización Militar’, *Revista Militar* Tomo III, No.8 (1955), p. 46.

Colonisation Brigade which would serve to give the army a 'modern sense.'¹⁶⁰ The unit would consist of engineer and infantry battalions employed in opening fields and adapting them for agricultural work, creating penetration lines, road networks and housing. Colonisation works, it was proposed, would be advanced by both volunteers and conscripts that after a period of service would receive land where they could eventually settle.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the colonisation mission would also result in a cost-effective means for civilian re-adaptation of enlisted personnel. Accordingly, it was asserted that national service directed toward colonisation would provide well prepared and suitable human capital to work in the rural extensions. This would also facilitate the de-escalation of violence by affecting the recruitment base of the armed groups.¹⁶²

Another influential thinker in the configuration of the Institute of Colonisation's goal was Brigadier General Sierra Ochoa in his role as Military Governor. As a reaction to what he considered was the unsuccessful experience of the Colmil during Gómez administration in restabilising public order, colonisation was seen as 'the only efficient means to resolve for once and for all the problem of banditry which keeps intensifying.'¹⁶³ Moreover, the process permitted articulation of the aspirations of those officers, like him, who believed the military government should by all means 'seize the opportunity' offered by its new position in power to both design and execute a policy to 'incorporate to national life half of its territory.'¹⁶⁴ A particular point of Sierras' line of thought was that even though it ascribed to the material causes of violence theory, which underpinned the strategic logic of state-building via military colonisation and virtuous administration as a method to raise the standards of living of the peasantry and promote social progress, it also revealed the potency of the anti-communist

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, pp.41-42.

¹⁶² Pinzón Forero, *La colonización militar*, pp.70-76.

¹⁶³ Sierra Ochoa, *Las Guerrillas de Llano*, p.107.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

ideology which had permeated a sector of the Colmil. This translated into the brutal side of the civilising mission with a more hard-headed judgement about the object of force:

The solution to the problem consists in exterminating the bandits and in incorporating the territory in which they roam into the national economy. The cost that the military extermination of banditry demands is not justified if the territory is not colonised and the healthy peoples of Colombia do not take effective possession of the land. These considerations are supported by several reasons: a) The immensity of the territory, its natural obstacles bordered by vast unexplored forests and jungles are factors that foment enemy dispersion and the use of ambushes and nullifies annihilation efforts. b) The action of the troops and auxiliaries cannot be maintained indefinitely, its costs are not justified as they don't produce decisive results c) The conditional surrender of the inhabitants of many regions addicted to banditry cannot be accepted without leaving superior forces, particularly in Los Llanos, to prevent new risings. d) However, the cost of permanent occupation troops to hold the territory is also high, and this manpower could be used to continue colonising other areas. Settlers could replace these occupation troops.[...] Selected settlers [by the Institute of Colonisation] will serve as occupation elements in improvised encampments, each consisting of at least fifty families. They will be supplied with weapons and will be reinforced with a small military garrison. The commander of the garrison will be the chief of the encampment and will organise defence activities, and will also proceed with land and cattle repartition. Settlers would be obliged to carry out mopping up operations of remaining bandits in combination with the other encampments.¹⁶⁵

Although by the end of 1953 the colonisation plans for the eastern-plains had been defined, the reconversion of the army, or at least the introduction of units solely devoted to the fulfilment of the mission, remained on paper only. One year after the military coup, the only results the Institute of Colonisation had to show in *Los Llanos* was the 'acquisition of 30,000 hectares of land in Casanare, where 1,000 families were placed by direct action of the military authorities of the region, each of them counting with an adequate parcel of land and hygienic housing.'¹⁶⁶ By 1957, even the regime's supporters felt the plans were too idealistic. Such was the opinion of Fluharty, who asserted that even if General Rojas sincerely believed in the strategic necessity of integrating the eastern plains into the national economy and populate them with immigrant agrarian populations, the simple fact that the Colombian geography was so complicated prevented any meaningful action to be taken. 'The mountains stand forbiddingly between the resources of the plains and those who could use them; they lie there, lonely, immense, inert and virtually sterile,' explained Fluharty whilst adding that the eastern plains were 'a contradiction

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp.105-106.

¹⁶⁶ N.a, 'Paz, Justicia y Libertad en las Brigadas del Ejército,' *Diana Revista del Comisariato del Ejército*, V.1 No.6, June (1954), p.70.

in terms per se to the words of a writer who described them as a region where the most formidable wealth sleeps.¹⁶⁷

On the face of it, the interest of the Rojas regime in the colonisation mission reduced after his consolidation in power by 1955. One reason for this was that the rehabilitation plan and the institutional machinery that was put in place soon lost its original purpose as an instrument for state-building, and became a tool of Rojas to purchase goodwill and create a popular base of support for his regime. This was largely a consequence of his move towards dictatorial rule in the second year after the military coup. The General announced that he would stay in power until 1958, and made it clear he had no intentions of re-inaugurating congress or organising elections, and moreover that he was determined to maintain the state-of-emergency which had remained active since 9 April. 'The parliamentary system' argued Rojas, 'is only possible when a country has achieved a high cultural level and when political parties have become civilized. To throw the country back into the electoral debate would be the equivalent of paving the way back to the return of violence.'¹⁶⁸ Thereafter, he showed his determination to create a state organised labour movement to underpin his personal political movement known as the 'armed forces-population binomial' or 'Third Force.'¹⁶⁹ To advance his political movement he decided to position his 20 year old daughter as director of SENDAS, whom he wished to transform in a symbol of his regime, a sort of 'Evita' following the example of Perón in Argentina.¹⁷⁰ The partisanship of Rojas also led him to name many of his cronies in high posts of the rehabilitation institutions, who demonstrated sheer administrative incompetence.¹⁷¹ The grandiose development projects SENDAS envisaged never materialised. In effect, the work of SENDAS was reduced to the distribution of hand-outs and the subsidy of essential

¹⁶⁷ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.10.

¹⁶⁸ N.t, *Diario Oficial*, 14 June 1955.

¹⁶⁹ Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, pp.214-217.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

commodities, mostly for the benefit of the legions of displaced persons who had escaped the violence in the countryside to settle in Bogotá's periphery. Meanwhile, the assistance offered in the regions by the Military Governors and the Brigade Commanders, simply turned into propaganda to praise the 'armed forces-population binomial' and criticise the failures of civilian politicians.¹⁷²

Evidently, the alienation of the political parties resulted from Rojas intention to remain in power. In particular the work of SENDAS' charitable work in the main urban areas became a target of their criticisms, as it was considered a serious threat by both parties and the Catholic Church to their patronage systems. Opposition started to grow and charges of corruption and graft became common place. Rojas reacted swiftly in mid-1955 by passing a more severe censorship decree than the one already in force with the state-of-emergency, which in effect terminated all remnants of free press in the country. Disapproval of the regime was generalised in the Liberal camp, which felt that the General had betrayed the goodwill the party and its followers had offered at outset of the regime, after facilitating the demobilisation of the guerrillas as a step towards political normalcy. Rojas responded to the growing opposition along the lines of the previous Conservative administration, stepping up the anti-communist rhetoric and declaring the Liberal opposition as Marxist subversives in character and outlawing the left wing parties.

The situation marked the beginning of the escalation of the conflict as many of the Liberal guerrillas who had demobilised began to regroup, and resumed fighting, targeting the Colmil as the symbol of the regime's power and in retaliation for the un-fulfilled promises of the rehabilitation agenda.¹⁷³ 'In Los Llanos misery still prevails among the immense majority of the population, and demands [peasant petitions to respect the guarantees of the amnesty] are

¹⁷² Torres del Rio, *Fuerzas Armadas*, p.57.

¹⁷³ Maullin, *Soldiers*, p.63.

receiving the worn out label 'communist' to justify repression [...] This in our opinion is why guerrilla action has restarted in many parts of the country',¹⁷⁴ explained a number of regrouped Llanos guerrillas in a letter to a former commander. A similar posture was evident in Tolima where a local newspaper, before its closure by Rojas, transcribed a letter from a local guerrilla leader to the President: 'I said in a solemn ceremony for the surrender of the revolutionary forces under my command "I exchange my rifle for a hoe," I believed that the promises made by the Colonel in representation of the National Army, would be happily and quickly fulfilled [...] We ask no other help than what was offered at the moment of the armistice when we surrendered our guns.'¹⁷⁵

While the attitude of many of the former Liberal guerrillas was considered black mail by supporters of Rojas who believed it did not justify the further resort to violence, it was also read by critics as a legitimate complaint resulting from broken promises of the amnesty and the regime's administrative incompetence. A staunch critic was Latin America scholar John Martz, who in his survey of Colombian politics on the eve of the transition to democracy expressed the view that: 'Having been placed in a position where enlightened rule might have generated necessary reforms, the military abrogated responsibility by trusting in the false value and personal pretensions of its leader, who was out of his element and unsuited to the administration of government.'¹⁷⁶ However, it was clear that there was also growing disaffection among Colmil officers with Rojas' mishandling of the rehabilitation policy, especially the attempt to build an urban political clientele and the inattention of the countryside. They judged that the mission of the military to be politically neutral was being undermined with the General's

¹⁷⁴ 'Unión revolucionaria, Enero 8 de 1957, Villavo, Sr. Guadalupe Salcedo,' Quoted in the appendix of: Germán Guzmán Campos, et.al, *La Violencia en Colombia*, n.p.

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, pp.50-51.

¹⁷⁶ Martz, *Colombia survey*, p.226.

growing partisanship, and that the lack of concrete state-building efforts in the violence prone areas amounted to dereliction of duty.

The view that the Rojas regime was administratively incompetent also gained strength due to the poor economic performance of the country after 1955, with criticisms of the regime's lack of preparations as the sharp fall of the price of coffee in the international markets generated a shock. The resulting need to devalue the currency led to an inability to acquire foreign loans to sort the growing fiscal deficit, all of which reduced the amount of resources to invest in the rehabilitation mission. As the Chief of the Armed Forces, General Duarte Blum is said to have commented to US officials in Bogotá 'the promises of economic aid [to the demobilised guerrillas] have not been met. Golden birds had been offered, and at the end everything amounted to a pair of blue jeans, a shirt and a safe-conduct.'¹⁷⁷

So, for those officers who had subscribed to the material causes of violence school of thought since 1953, the lack of 'virtuous administration' and the alleged corruption, and charges of ineptitude in the Rojas clique became a source of tension that would eventually lead to the General's removal by his own comrades. Not surprisingly, two of the main conspirators were Chief of the Armed Forces General Duarte Blum and his protégé, the recently promoted Brigadier General Saiz who was named Secretary General of the Ministry of War; an officer who as mentioned had been appointed to undertake the state-building effort in *Los Llanos*.¹⁷⁸ It is clear that the failures of the Rojas regime in the execution of the National Rehabilitation plan deeply disturbed this faction of the Colmil. The feeling was summarised by Valencia Tovar, who in his memoirs nostalgically expressed the view that the military coup was an

¹⁷⁷ Sylvia Galvis and Alberto Donadío, *El Jefe Supremo*, (Medellín: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2002), p.134.

¹⁷⁸ Two days before the Military Junta that removed Rojas was installed, both officers had made manifest to the Officer in-charge of Colombian affairs at the Department of State, Albert H. Gerberich, that there was a general discontent in the Colmil with General Rojas. Specifically, they complained about his intentions to remain indefinitely in power, the growing corruption charges against him and his family and above all the administrative mistakes he had incurred in. Memorandum from Gerberich to Secretary of State quoted in: Galvis and Donadio, *El Jefe Supremo*, p. 210.

exceptional episode in Colombian history, foreign to the tradition of the Colmil, and concluding that it was a missed opportunity to take advantage of the situation and utilise the power vested in it to advance a true national policy of state-building that could have de-escalated the causes of the conflict.¹⁷⁹

The battle of Villarrica– the intensification of violence and the road to The National Front, 1955-1958

The effects in terms of violence reduction generated by the amnesty had worn off by the end of 1955. In that year there were 11,000 deaths, one of the highest rates since 1948. Murders had begun to increase as a result of payback, vendettas and repossession of land. There were numerous accounts of former Liberal or Conservative fighters who had returned to ‘civilian life’ only to be tracked by their victims, or returned to their land to see it occupied by others,¹⁸⁰ by rival political factions, which generated a vicious circle of violence. This was precisely the situation that Rojas had vowed to prevent from happening when he assumed power, and so, the growing sense of insecurity augmented public mistrust of his regime, and in the Colmil more generally, as its legitimacy rested on the role that it had acquired as a protective force after the fall of Gomez.

Mainly though the new wave of violence in the countryside that began early 1955 was provoked by organised armed groups that operated in more or less the same geographical areas between the eastern and central cordilleras. The most pervasive type of violence was undertaken by demobilised guerrillas that had either violated the terms of the amnesty, or had not accepted them in the first place, turning to outright banditry, particularly in the rich coffee growing areas encompassing the departments of Cundinamarca, Tolima, Caldas and Valle. The dynamics of these groups were summarised by the British Ambassador in Bogotá in a report to

¹⁷⁹ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p. 380.

¹⁸⁰ Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia*, p.366.

Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan on the escalation of violence. The Ambassador explained that numerous villages in these departments were being attacked by groups of well-armed bandit groups formed of up to sixty men. The Ambassador judged ‘that while the political parties seemed not to have no part in the bandit activities, party feeling probably has,’ and stressed that ‘there appears to be a large number of dispossessed peasants who resort to banditry either for lack of any other means of livelihood, or for the purpose of getting back their former property or acquiring another.’¹⁸¹

The second type of group were the communist guerrilla forces, known as ‘movement of peasant self-defence’ that had consolidated after the establishment of ‘free zones’ at the end of Gomez regime, and which since the coup had viewed the Rojas regime with open hostility. The two areas under the communist control were known as El Davis and Villarrica, in the Sumapaz region, located in the fringe between the departments of Cundinamarca and Tolima less than a hundred kilometres from Bogotá. They had been areas of peasant colonisation since the late 1930s, and where constant clashes with legal land owners of the region constantly ended in bloodshed.¹⁸² The Communist Party had a strong rapport among the peasant population there, and had advanced a process of political indoctrination which had included the creation of a cadre school at El Davis.¹⁸³ The high degree of organisation had been fundamental in the formation of the ‘self-defence’ peasant guerrilla force after 9 April and which had since then maintained a defensive posture. It is in this movement, FARC historians assert, that the roots of that insurgent group are found.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ ‘New wave of banditry in Colombia,’ April 19 1955, FO 371/114245, NAR Kew.

¹⁸² See: Eduardo Pizarro, *Las Farc: De guerrilla campesina a máquina de guerra, 1949-2011* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2011), pp.30-39.

¹⁸³ For the most recent research on the subject see: Alfredo Molano, ‘Nacimiento de las FARC: De EL Davis a Villarrica’, *El Espectador*, 7 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/nacimiento-de-farc-de-el-davis-villarrica-articulo-497036> (Accessed 20 June 2014).

¹⁸⁴ Pizarro, *Las Farc*, pp.30-39.

At the start of 1952 the Communist's strengthened their organisation by acquiring new allies: Liberal guerrillas of the wider region who had gone through a process of political reconversion after their contact with elements of the Communist Party. These liberal rebels and their families moved into these mountainous areas to join efforts against the repression of Gomez's *Chulavita* auxiliary forces, but mainly to escape from retaliation from their former comrades, who referred to them as *liberales sucios* or *comunes* (dirty or common Liberals) and accused them of treason for falling out with the party leadership.¹⁸⁵ The military coup marked a change in direction for the leaders of the communist enclaves who thought it marked the transition to a new phase of the conflict between the 'oligarchy' and the communist peasant movement.¹⁸⁶ According to historian Alfredo Molano, the peasants deeply mistrusted General Rojas, who they rightly considered a staunch anti-communist, and so did not engage in negotiations with his delegates at the wake of the coup. They were suspicious that the amnesty was a ploy of the Colmil to ally with the mainstream Liberal guerrillas and incorporate them into the regimes' forces in order to exterminate the *comunes*.¹⁸⁷

The *bandoleros* and not the communist 'self-defence forces', were the groups that had been undertaking the greater number of violent acts after the coup, and given that their activities affected a wider segment of the population, making them the biggest threat to Rojas political standing. It was somewhat paradoxical then that the focus of the military effort became the extermination of the 'self-defence forces'. Inevitably, the decision to commit the majority of the scarce resources and the remaining political capital to the neutralisation of the communist enclaves, despite the fact that they did not pose a real challenge to the stability of the regime, given that they were strictly adhering to the doctrine of self-defence imposed by the Communist

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ This according to future FARC commander 'Tirofijo.' See the guerrilla's propaganda booklet: Manuel Marulanda Vélez, *Cuadernos de campaña* (Bogotá: Ediciones Abejón Mono, 1973), p.50.

¹⁸⁷ Molano, *Amnistía y violencia*, p. 28.

Party, led to Rojas' fall. Moreover, the decision to resort to force against the enclaves highlighted many of the failings evidenced during Gomez administration. Not only did it alienate sections of the Colmil who judged the General was acting irresponsibly by committing the military to an infeasible operation, but also that the use of excessive force was counter-productive, and furthermore, that such an effort did not tackle the real sources of the growing violence and even less the roots of the conflict which was to what they had committed to solve in June 1953.¹⁸⁸

The anti-communist narrative continued to be ever more pervasive during the final two years of the Rojas regime. This led officers to complain that the Colmil seemed still to operate within a constricted intellectual framework that hindered the correct identification of the adversary and how the armed instrument should be employed. In the words of Valencia Tovar: 'The myopia and inefficiency of the secret services and of military intelligence led them to see the guerrilla problem as an indecipherable amalgam, which they took as proof, although inexact, of what the government was propagating: the definition of the enemy as liberal-communist.'¹⁸⁹ But more than a dogma of faith in the need to utilise force to exterminate an existential threat, anti-communism was also being utilised by the regime with two political purposes in mind: first, to continue discrediting the growing Liberal opposition to the regime that was demanding General Rojas fulfilled his promise of holding free elections. Rojas responded with an argument retrieved from the Gomez period, arguing that the growing guerrilla activity was being supported by the Liberal leaders. Second, the resort to anti-communism was used leverage US support and obtain material assistance to wage its campaign. 'Aren't Communists criminals?'¹⁹⁰ This was the answer of the Colonel in charge of

¹⁸⁸ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p. 270.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ US. Embassy to DoS, 'Conversation with CL Navas Pardo on situation of violence,' 27 May 1955, RG59 72052/9-357 Box 2995, NARA.

operations in Tolima when questioned by US Embassy officials regarding the *mélange* of groups operating in the region which included *bandoleros*, conservative *pájaro* death squads and the communist guerrillas. US officials in Bogotá transmitted to Washington that various Colmil commanders were convinced that they were facing a Communist organised movement, of which banditry was one of its manifestations. They were prudent, however, before granting validity to any of the assertions regarding the nature of the enemy offered by the Colmil, which they considered contradictory.¹⁹¹ The explanation given by the Embassy to Washington in a report on the public order situation in Tolima allows to illustrate these reservations:

Aside from the purely military information contained in the report, Embassy believes the analysis interesting for the insight it gives into official Colombian thinking on the problem of the continued public disturbances. The analysis reflects the desire of the Colombian authorities to blame the outbreaks on Communist provocateurs, and at the same time reveals their realization that the problems involved are much more complex than the relatively facile explanation of Communist agitation would indicate. The analysis also shows the extreme frustration evinced by an organized military group confronted by guerrilla activity – an unseen and unknown enemy attacking from and escaping into large uncontrolled areas. The analysis [by the Colmil] stated that “The Brigade Command has reached the conclusion that the terrorist plan, in its widest program, is completely of Communist origin.” Later in the report, however, the conclusion is reached “that all the rural inhabitants are potential bandits.” In another part of the report it is estimated that “the anti-socials in Tolima do not number more than 2,000. The rest of them are followers who let themselves become disoriented by political passion or ambition.” The analysis fails to present satisfactory evidence of Communist infiltration and inspiration for the continued and widespread outbreaks. The sum of the facts serve only to support a thesis that Communist efforts at provocation exist, and are made easy by the state of fear, disorganization and atmosphere of vengeance brought about by banditry and the remnants of the politically motivated fighting of past years.¹⁹²

To understand better the problems Rojas military policy faced against the communist enclaves, let us briefly analyse how the campaign against the enclaves developed. The Colmil offensive began to escalate on 22 March 1955, after 28 former liberal rebels of the region were massacred in plain daylight in a Coffee hacienda. The commander of the Army Brigade in Tolima declared he had irrefutable proof that the perpetrators were the *comunes* operating from Villarrica who had descended from the mountains to attack their enemies and get their hands

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² US Embassy to DOS, ‘Government efforts to cope with civil disturbances,’ 24 March 1955, RG59 72052/9-357Box 2995 NARA.

on the produce of the harvest.¹⁹³ As a reaction the Colmil stepped up its patrolling in the area via multiple public order commissions, which became easy targets for the guerrillas. Not a week passed when an army company was ambushed by superior guerrilla forces.¹⁹⁴ Rojas reacted vehemently to the setback and declared the whole area a ‘zone of military operations’ to conduct a major campaign to destroy the *comunes*. The conduct of the Villarica campaign demonstrated the armed forces still suffered from severe operational deficiencies demonstrated during the early days of *La Violencia*. When orders came to initiate the offensive, three reinforced Battalions numbering 2,000 men were mobilised to the area in what was to be an unplanned and uncoordinated operation,¹⁹⁵ with poorly prepared officers commanding units given only vague orders to ‘pacify’ the area, which they usually interpreted as a blank check to chastise and displace the population.¹⁹⁶ ‘The troops burned everything, they cut down coffee groves, destroyed crops of everything edible’ according to accounts of villagers gathered by historian John Henderson.¹⁹⁷

The Colmil’s actions generated a wave of refugees, at least 3,000 alone in the first week who arrived in Ibagué, the departmental capital.¹⁹⁸ Initially the Colombian press (the majority

¹⁹³ ‘Matan los Bandoleros a 28 personas’ *El Tiempo*, 23 March 1955.

¹⁹⁴ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.272.

¹⁹⁵ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Priority: Joint Embassy –ARMA-AIRA-CAS Message’, 16 April 1955, RG59 720.52/9-557 Box 2995, NARA.

¹⁹⁶ The *modus operandi* of the Colmil in Villarica resembled the one used during the campaign of Los Llanos. For example, the Army CoS confirmed to the US military attaché in Bogotá that the forceful evacuation of the population of Villarica was a military necessity: ‘authorities [i.e.: the Colmil] have concluded that this is only way to solve situation. [Army CoS] Mentioned that guerrillas have constructed fortifications 1,500 meters from Villarica [...] Usually reliable Army source Melgar (about 15 miles north of Villarica) states that following evacuation entire population Villarica, town destroyed by air force bombing and burning.’ See: US Embassy to DoS, ‘Priority: Joint Embassy –ARMA-AIRA-CAS Message’, 16 April 1955, RG59 720.52/9-557 Box 2995, NARA.

¹⁹⁷ Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia*, p.368.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*; US embassy officials indicated that according to the Governor of Tolima between 2,000 and 2,500 peasants had been evacuated from the surroundings of Villarica, most of them arriving in Army trucks. Embassy officials, quoting Army intelligence sources (G-2), explained that while most evacuees were probably persons seeking protection, bandits would probably be amongst them and would have to be screened. See: US Embassy to DoS, ‘Priority: Joint Embassy –ARMA-AIRA-CAS Message’, 16 April 1955, RG59 720.52/9-557 Box 2995, NARA.

of it controlled by Liberal party sympathisers) reacted positively to Rojas' determination to take action against the *comunes*, who were seen as radicals manipulated by the Communist party and causing chaos in the Tolima region, raising the flag of class warfare to mobilise the local peasantry and direct violence against the *limpios* and Liberal landowners.¹⁹⁹ But the support for the military action had its limits, as the weekly magazine *Semana*, owned by the exiled Alberto Lleras stressed, a 'complete analysis of the social and economic aspects of the situation' was necessary to stabilise the area and suffocate the incendiary discourse of the Communists.²⁰⁰ This signalled the need for the 'construction of hospitals, schools, the amplification of housing and the revision of land titles in order to take care of the claims to rights of numerous peasants that had armed themselves.'²⁰¹

But as soon as the reports of army atrocities began reaching the press they became a liability for Rojas, as criticisms of his conduct of the campaign generated a backlash in the capital. The General promptly used his executive powers to sign a censorship decree defining the spreading of news from violence ridden areas as 'acts of sabotage' fuelled by communist conspirators, a move that the US embassy considered was prompted by the Government's fear of more reports 'gaining greater currency and credence.'²⁰² Rojas' move however, did not come without costs for his credibility in Washington. President Eisenhower, for example had authorised the State Department to inform the General privately that US opinion would be aroused if he persisted in suppressing the printed press. Indeed, as it had been the policy of Washington during the Gomez years, assistance to Bogotá would not be based simply on the fact that the regime was

¹⁹⁹ Fluharty, *Dance of the millions*, p.282.

²⁰⁰ 'Causas Economicas', *Semana*, 12 April 1955.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² US Embassy Bogota to DOS, 10 May 1955, RG59 72052/9-357 Box 2995, NARA.

anti-communist, as it was felt that the threat was being amplified to suppress mainstream opposition.²⁰³

The problem of not being able to influence the US positively in the hope of obtaining military assistance was that the Colmil continued to showcase serious operational weaknesses in confronting the communist self-defence forces who were engaging in a campaign of attrition at Villarrica. The Colmil, looking for option to break the impasse, had pressed for a speedy delivery of materiel that could serve that objective and expedite the destruction of the enclave. This request included a petition for 3,000 napalm bombs to be dropped in Villarrica, which was promptly rejected by US diplomatic sources.²⁰⁴ Incendiary bombs were eventually acquired and used in a massive bombardment by Colombian air force planes between the 7 and 10 of June, which broke the communists' defence, which began evacuating the zone. According to Molano, the army offensive forced the guerrillas to change their tactic of static defence and shift to one of mobile warfare, which allowed them to harass the Colmil and facilitate the relocation of the survivors of Villarrica across the cordillera to new zones of colonisation. Despite the escape of the main body of the guerrilla movement, the seizure of Villarrica was declared a success by the Army CoS Colonel Navas Pardo, who argued that the 'communist organisation of Tolima' had been broken.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Stephen Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anti-Communism*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1988), p.86.

²⁰⁴ Embassy Bogotá to DoS, 'Export of Napalm bombs to Colombia', 19 May 1955, RG59 / 72100/6-155, Box 3002, NARA.

²⁰⁵ US Embassy to DoS, 'Conversation with CL Navas Pardo on situation of violence,' 27 May 1955, RG59 72052/9-357 Box 2995, NARA. Officials at the Embassy were of the opinion that the Army CoS, Colonel Navas Pardo 'is known to be close to the President, and is believed to have a considerable influence on the latter's view, which he, in turn reflects.' In this respect, the Colonel's view that the conflict in Tolima was solely the responsibility of international Communism, was not an isolated voice. Colonel Navas Pardo, explained Embassy officials, 'sowed to be more convinced than ever of Communist domination and control of the Tolima troubled zone. He gave little stress to other elements which have elsewhere been mentioned as important factors in the outbreak of violence. For him to have taken a different position would have undercut the President's and the Government's official position for which he himself is largely responsible.' See: Embassy Bogotá to DoS, 'Communist documents found in Eastern Tolima', 27 May 1955, 720.52/9-357 RG59 1956-1959 Box 2995, NARA.

But for Colmil officers critical of Rojas conduct of the conflict, the Villarica campaign was nothing less than an improvised operational response characterised by the excessive use of force which had been unable to deliver strategic results. In part, they concluded, this was mainly the result of an ideological explanation of the enemy's nature that made the military regime focus on the symptoms of the problem, rather than its causes. Chief of the Armed Forces Brigadier General Duarte Blum, for example, stated to the US military mission that he was being by-passed by Rojas in the conduction of the campaign in Tolima, and that excessive force had brought the area into total turmoil. The solution to violence in the area, Duarte argued, did not depend on the application of military force, but rather in social and economic rehabilitation, particularly addressing the issues of land tenure.²⁰⁶ He thus proposed a 'reevaluation of the government's strategy' which would allow for a return to the original objectives traced under the amnesty programme of June 1953.²⁰⁷ There was clearly no possibility of anything of the sort happening under Rojas. To begin with, given the political conditions it was certain that the regime was only interested in procuring the demobilisation of the communist groups. De-escalating the offensive would have made Rojas look weak, not to mention that he was unable to offer an alternative, and that the instruments of rehabilitation had already lost all credibility, and the limited resources available had been diverted by the General's acolytes to other purposes –including personal gain- rather than pacification.²⁰⁸

The importance of this interpretation of the dynamics of the violence by Colmil chiefs like General Duarte Blum, was that it found its echo in the discourse of the Liberal leader Alberto Lleras.²⁰⁹ The opposition leader appeared to offer a political alternative to those officers

²⁰⁶ US Embassy to DoS, 'View on the causes and solution of Violence in Tolima,' May 17 1955, 72052/9-357 RG59 1956-1959 Box 2995, NARA.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, pp.228-230.

²⁰⁹ The rapprochement between the Liberal party and Generals Duarte Blum was not unexpected given the political circumstances, at least for US officials. The Embassy in Bogota, for example, highlighted that Duarte Blum 'because of his national standing and Liberal tendencies, was most successful in carrying out President Rojas

that had been subscribing to the causes of violence school of thought and who were finding themselves at odds with Rojas and his conduct of the conflict. These officers eventually became instrumental in aiding with the downfall of the regime by offering their support to the National Front accord, which Alberto Lleras Camargo and Laureano Gomez signed in Spain in June 1956, and which set the basis for the transition to democratic rule.²¹⁰

In overall, General Rojas evidently failed in his role as pacifier, which was the initial excuse for pushing him to power in 1953. These disenchantments, combined with his intentions of prolonging his tenure as President beyond 1958 turned out to be the pretext for his removal from office. After a brief period under a *junta militar* composed of five General officers, the power-sharing compromise between Liberals and Conservatives was validated through a plebiscite. The National Front compromise called for the alternation of the presidency between the two parties for a period of 16 years and the equal repartition of government bureaucracy as a means to deactivate political competition and defuse the bipartisan nature *la Violencia*.

Conclusion: The influence of *La Violencia* in Colmil thought

The origins of the premises that underpinned the Colmil strategic outlook since the 1960s are found in the tensions produced by *La Violencia*, in particular, the conduct of that part of the conflict by President Laureano Gómez and the initial expectations created by General Gustavo Rojas after the *coup d'état* of June 1953. In particular, four basic conclusions would give shape to the Colmil's value system at the turn of the decade.

First, that not only extreme partisanship had originated *La Violencia*, but that it was above all caused by socio-economic grievances in the countryside. From this followed the view

Pinilla's initial policies of pacification and amnesty.' And that it was precisely due to that success that the regime had 'decided that they did not wish to enhance his prestige further and had therefore side-tracked him.' See: US Embassy to DoS, 'View on the causes and solution of Violence in Tolima,' May 17 1955, RG59 1956-1959 72052/9-357 Box 2995, NARA.

²¹⁰ Martz, *Colombia Survey*, p.261.

that the conflict had been allowed to deteriorate due to the negligence of the politicians. In this respect, the Koreans argued that the politicians with their partisan bickering had forced the peasantry into an intractable cycle of violence, and that the real causes of the conflict were being concealed under the façade of the Conservative-Liberal divide. A third point, was that the Colmil would require to reflect on its behaviour during the 1950s, and learn from the political and operational mistakes it committed, both in terms of its excesses during the Gomez administration as well as the lost chance of achieving national reconciliation during Rojas mandate. Finally, that to solve the conflict it would be necessary that politicians and soldiers worked together to execute some sort of enlightened government policy that could awake the Colombian peasantry from the superficial bipartisan split, and to deal effectively with the lamentable socio-economic conditions in rural Colombia to deactivate the real causes of *La Violencia* and ultimately reduce the potential for communist radicalisation.

As will be analysed in the following chapter, as a reaction *La Violencia* Colmil officers would promote the view that the effective protection of the population was a pre-condition to solve the conflict, no matter their political allegiance. This included a demand for a military approach that favoured less coercive means, resonant of the mantra of so-called ‘population centric counter-insurgency.’²¹¹ This evidently translated into a requirement for the Colmil to assume a nation-building role, by emphasising that rebellion was caused by legitimate grievances of socio-economic character that had to be addressed effectively to pacify the country. Force, for its part, was considered to play a supporting role in the strategy. Its goal was to achieve the surgical elimination of the armed elements of the insurgency in order to enhance the manipulation of the structure of incentives of the target population by other means.

²¹¹ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.231.

CHAPTER IV
CHANGES IN COLOMBIAN MILITARY THINKING – MODERNISATION, UNCONVENTIONAL
WAR AND THE TRANSITION TO COUNTER-INSURGENCY, 1958 -1962

The restitution of democracy via the National Front accord mandated a change in the role of the Colmil and its relationship to Colombian politics and society. In this context, in May 1958, President elect Alberto Lleras Camargo furnished a working agreement with the military leadership that effectively granted them autonomy in exchange for political neutrality and non-deliberation. The immediate goal of the agreement was to secure a smooth democratic transition by alleviating political tension, as a failed army putsch organised by a group of disaffected colonels prior to the presidential elections had demonstrated that deposed General Rojas still commanded some allegiance within the ranks. Although the agreement on military autonomy eventually became an inflexible doctrine for the conduct of civilian-military relations hindering the formulation of strategy ever since, at the time, it appeared to be an adequate measure that satisfied both politicians and soldiers during the transition from military rule for two intertwined reasons.

First, given the belief that the National Front heralded the end of *La Violencia*, the tenets of the ‘Lleras doctrine’ seemed to be conducive to the Colmil’s political subordination and to promote non-partisanship, which reassured both political parties that the military would not be pitted against the other. Second, the agreement went in line with the belief of many senior officers associated with the Prusso-German tradition, that the protracted involvement in ‘public order’ had been detrimental to their ethos and had intensified their politicisation. In other words, the ‘Lleras doctrine’ responded to the desires of those who believed the civil conflict had diverted the Colmil from attending to matters more appropriate to its profession. In this sense, many officers considered that given the expected denouement of *La Violencia* with the National Front, the new civil-military accord allowed them to reassert their

professional ethos to focus on improving capabilities, as well as standardise procedures with Western armies for the planning, training and conduct of conventional war.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, since the war with Peru in 1930, military thinking in the country was firmly restricted to European concepts of warfare, with a firm belief that the military's main role was to defend the country in case of external war. In the words of a group of US military officials reviewing the Colmil in 1960 for the DoD, prior to the Second World War the typical career officer in the country had 'sought for the Colombian armed forces to attain the standards of the great military powers of Europe, planning and organizing for external war following the models of the much admired German General Staff system.'¹ This outlook had accordingly, made it difficult for many officers, since the outbreak of *La Violencia*, 'to believe that the armed forces should play a role in the maintenance of internal order or defence of the government'.² During the 1950s, the experiences of the Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez as part of the UN peacekeeping efforts also influenced Colombian army planners' ideas on the suitable configuration of the armed forces. In fact, the Colombia Infantry Battalion begun to function as a template combat unit for the general adoption by the Colmil of the US staff structure and organisation.³ The importance of the Colmil's international experience in the early Cold War, according to an officer of the US Military Mission in Bogotá at the time, was that it allowed field grade officers to acquire a 'more professional view of military matters' and inform their efforts to restructure their command and staff system in accordance to the practices and priorities of the US.⁴

¹ 'Interdepartmental Survey Team to Colombia Preliminary Report (Minority), Joseph J. Koontz, Lieutenant Colonel, DOD Representative 1960 February 9', Charles T. R. Bohannon papers, Box 12, HIA.

² Ibid.

³ Hernández, *La influencia de los Estados Unidos*, passim.

⁴ Russell Ramsey, 'The Colombian Battalion in Korea and Suez', *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1967, p. 558.

Clearly, after 1945, the focus of Colombian officers with the preparation for external war was also influenced by the emerging concern of Washington with Soviet encroachment in the region. The ratification of the Rio Pact in 1947, which guaranteed mutual assistance in case of extra continental attack, and the promotion in Washington of the concept of Hemispheric Defense helped to shape Colmil thinking. The concept demanded the provision of Latin American armies with new capabilities to aid the objective of defending access to the continent and face 'diversionary attacks', particularly in the Panama Canal area.⁵ As discussed in the previous chapter, military thought in Colombia had tended to subscribe to those continental defence requirements, despite the challenge of *La Violencia*. This was a consequence of the fact US military assistance since the signing of the MAP in 1952 was restricted to that specific purpose.⁶ Nevertheless, divisions of opinion within the ranks about their core missions were already present from the mid-1950s. They became more prominent, however, once civilian government was re-established and it became evident that the pacification of the country would require the use of the Colmil and not simply an accord between the parties. As US army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Koontz, who led the DoD Colombia survey team in 1960, explained:

Senior officers reflect the high sense of professionalism and dignity of the Army. Many maintain attitudes of strict disinterest in civilian affairs, and desire the Army to remain an isolated segment of the population, concerned only with preparation for defense by conventional methods against orthodox external aggression. Others appreciate the necessity for the Army to close the gulf which now separates it from the civilians of the country, and for it to act effectively for the public welfare, whether its action may be to chase bandits, or to help civilians in underdeveloped areas.⁷

⁵ NSC-68 'United States Objectives and Programs for National Security' of April 1950', 7 April 1950. Vol. I, FRUS.

⁶ These provisions on the limited role of Latin American militaries in Hemispheric Defense were initially framed in the NSC-68 of April 1950. These remained unchanged in subsequent NSC lineaments of US policy during most of the Eisenhower administration. These plainly stated that the military aid provided could not be used for 'internal security operations'. See for example: NSC 5902/1 'Statement of U.S policy toward Latin America', 16 February 1959. Vol. XX, FRUS.

⁷ 'Interdepartmental Survey Team to Colombia Preliminary Report (Minority), Joseph J. Koontz, Lieutenant Colonel, DOD Representative 1960 February 9', Charles T. R. Bohannon papers, Box 12, HIA.

However, the renewed intention of the Colmil leadership to continue theorising and preparing for the requirements of Hemispheric Defense as its main assignment changed. Lleras Camargo's administration soon requested the chiefs of staff to prioritise internal security for two fundamental reasons. First, because despite its conciliatory tone, the National Front did not put a closure to the violence and soon spun off new bandit and guerrilla groups unreconciled to the partisan compromise and defiant of the renewed calls for amnesty and rehabilitation offered by the government. Second that the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, less than five months into the Lleras Camargo administration, had an almost immediate effect on the country's political elite which began to consider seriously the threat of Communist influenced insurgency. These were the key arguments of the President in his yearly report to Congress (the Colombian equivalent to the US 'state of the nation' speech) in 1959, when he explained the foreseeable role of the Colmil:

The armed forces cannot abandon the major role that corresponds to them for the preservation of internal public order. A bigger perturbation, or if disorder becomes endemic, will weaken the nation for its international defence. This internal assignment has to be understood after a necessary revision of all the accumulated experience of a decade filled with agitation and fights in which the army has been forced to improvise varied operations on a daily basis, and, in which their organisation and personnel has had to live in a constant state of emergency. We have to consider now the preparation and training of units that could work as an experiment for an ample transformation and adaptation of our military to present and future needs.⁸

Moreover, the Cuban revolution placed the continued rural banditry problem in Washington's spotlight, which, preoccupied with the possible regional repercussions of Fidel Castro's success, began to modify its military priorities in the region. Hence the US became more engaged with bolstering the stability of the new Colombian government with renewed defence and security assistance.⁹ Finally, Lleras Camargo's political agenda would adhere to

⁸ 'Informe al congreso, 20 julio 1959,' Quoted in: Benjamin Villegas (ed.), *Alberto Lleras: Antología. Tomo IV: El Gobernante*, (Bogotá, Villegas Editores, 2006), p. 357.

⁹ Eventually by 1962, as the US had feared, the Cuban success did serve to embolden the already existing self-styled communist guerrilla groups that dated from the Gomez era. These groups soon adopted new strategic goals aimed at the seizure of political power via the use of force. But mainly, the revolution influenced the formation of new local insurgencies following the revolutionary 'foco' theory popularised by Che Guevara and Regis Debray

the discourse of modernisation theory, promoted by the recently inaugurated Kennedy administration, and which considered that the containment of internal unrest and the advance of communism would require the close collaboration of the armed forces with the government's development plans. But the promotion of development or nation-building roles for allied militaries in the third world had some precedent in US policy. The Eisenhower administration, for example, had begun, in its final stages, to organise the requirements to bolster the internal security capabilities of Latin American countries, which gained momentum after Castro's triumphal entry to Havana. In November 1958, the 'Draper Committee' formed by the US President to review military aid to Latin America concluded that there was a correlation between military aid and socio-economic development, thus suggesting that assistance along those lines might promote simultaneously security and modernisation. These assumptions led to the eventual readjustment of the MAP's terms, for example, shifting from the promotion of air defence battalions to combat engineer ones, with the argument that better mobility would provide benefits for the population as well as security.¹⁰ In a speech to the Colmil leadership in June 1961, Lleras Camargo summarised the broad strategic situation the country found itself in and clarified what the military instrument's goal was:

At this time we are faced with the contradictions of a world engaged in cold war. For the first time in our history we are in the front lines against the danger of a frontal attack. We do not want to be, we cannot be, neutral. [...] You know that our enemies have been able to conquer almost without a shot half of the world for the new imperialism. Our mission is to maintain democracy, an efficient, strong democracy, able to carry out the needed changes in social conditions to bring about prosperity. Our duty is to defend peace and security.¹¹

As this chapter will elucidate, the correlation of Colombia's endemic violence with the growing concerns of the Cold War at the closure of the 1950s marked the beginning of a transitional period in Colmil thought that extended into 1962, with the development of counter-

and which were to receive support from Havana. Followers of 'foquismo' in Colombia included the MOEC founded in 1960, and eventually the ELN founded in 1964, and the M19 in 1973.

¹⁰ Coleman, *Colombia and the United States*, pp. 188, 190-191.

¹¹ 'Lleras addresses Bogota Military Club', *Bogota Domestic Service*, 1 June 1961, Accessed via: FBIS.

insurgency theory and practice. The transition commenced with the inauguration by President Lleras Camargo of a new rehabilitation and development programme to finally put an end to the chapter of *La Violencia*. His policy signalled the return of the Colmil to the mission of main guarantor of 'public order', with the objective of putting muscle behind the government's amnesty and relief agenda, and to coerce armed elements that did not respond to his renewed calls to cease violence. Likewise, the lack of capacity in key sectors of public administration, led the President to consider the Colmil as a key instrument to execute the diverse economic and social development initiatives of the government in the war-torn countryside.¹² As expected, this led to the revival of the state-building narrative in Colmil thinking which would become a theme of fundamental contention throughout the decade.

As noted, Washington soon became enthusiastic with Lleras Camargo's policies and his engagement with the Colmil. As a result of the Cuban revolution the military role in state-building gained political credibility in much of Latin America as a viable strategic course of action to deal with underdevelopment, considered to be the main cause of violence and a Petri dish for Communist insurgency. The main thrust for the revival of the mission was the counter-insurgency discourse promoted by President John F. Kennedy's, and which would permeate the Alliance for Progress initiative. The Alliance, apart from its anti-communism which gave it strategic logic, was also shaped by modernisation theory with a 'notion that there was a single, linear path to economic development'.¹³ By late 1962, with proactive US endorsement, counter-insurgency became the distinctive framework to manage the recurring violence in Colombia. By arguing that the nature of war had fundamentally changed with the multiplication of Communist insurgencies in three continents, and with Colombia as one of the perceived frontlines in Latin America, the military instrument's role and utility had to be reconsidered.

¹² 'Army to aid in eradicating violence,' *Bogota Radio Cadena Nacional*, 3 February 1961, Accessed via: FBIS.

¹³ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, pp.44-45.

In this respect, the chapter will be divided thematically in three parts to analyse in depth how the Colmil reassessed the role of the armed instrument during its transition to counter-insurgency and how its basic prescriptions influenced the Colombian's strategic outlook to become dominant features of its thinking thereafter. The first two sections are concerned with the reasons why the Colmil reassessed the nature of the conflict and the instrumentality of force through the main operational precepts of counter-insurgency theory. The third section is concerned with how a modernisation narrative influenced Colmil thinking, in the context of Lleras Camargo's Rehabilitation agenda and The Alliance for Progress, leading to the revival of the state-building mission.

Reacting to *La Violencia* - Unconventional warfare and the debate over military technique

As a result of the sense of apparent intractability of *La Violencia* during the late 1950s, the reaction to the failure to produce tangible results against the guerrillas was explained by various officers as an inability of the armed forces to adapt to the behaviour of the adversary and apply the correct sort of methods. This reflection gained impetus due to the unrelenting rural banditry problem and the increased threat of communist influenced insurgency which could affect the stability of the newly inaugurated civilian government of the National Front. Some officers, particularly those that were later associated to the Korean tradition, would begin to advocate the adoption of the tenets of counter-insurgency to inform the conduct of the Colmil. This section will argue that counter-insurgency, actively promoted by the recently elected Kennedy administration, offered to these Colmil officers a consoling narrative to explain and avoid the past failures in dealing with *La Violencia*, and hence, gained ground as the basis for their strategic formulation as the decade progressed.

The transit to counter-insurgency in the Colmil was all but immediate, the rapidly changing geopolitical conditions notwithstanding. As already mentioned, at the onset of the National Front, the main concern of the Colmil chiefs was the recovery of the professional character of the army. The stress was placed on the study of defence issues termed as ‘conventional’, like the modernisation of their General Staff, questions of national mobilisation and the transfer of lessons from the Colombia Battalion to the operational units of the Colmil. In this sense, there were strong voices within the Colmil demanding the avoidance of internal security missions and the entanglement with sectarian politics. Even President Lleras Camargo lamented to a US DoD survey mission that visited the country in 1960, how adamant his Chiefs of Staff were about avoiding the internal security mission:

[Lleras Camargo] had tried to impress on the leaders of the armed forces the need of training for this kind of [unconventional] warfare, but they would not listen to him. He thought, however, they would listen to American army leaders [...] The president then stated that one of the most useful things that we could do would be to have our mission train the armed forces to fight this kind of [unconventional] warfare.¹⁴

Nonetheless, there were already plenty voices within the Colmil counselling against the conventional-minded leadership. Colombian officers confided to US military officials that many of them agreed with the President’s view that the precepts of Hemispheric Defense were outmoded given that in the ‘age of massive weapons it could be entrusted to largely to the United States.’¹⁵ The Secretary to the Minister of War, Brigadier General Alberto Terán, apparently behind his boss’s back, even went further, and apprised to the Military Attaché informally at a dinner party that he was sure the military would formally re-examine their roles and mission ‘should there be a re-orientation in regard to advice and assistance of the US military mission toward the Colombian Armed Forces in light of what many Colombian senior

¹⁴ ‘Interdepartmental Survey Team to Colombia Preliminary Report (Minority), Joseph J. Koontz, Lieutenant Colonel, DOD Representative 1960 February 9’, Charles T. R. Bohannon papers, Box 12, HIA.

¹⁵ Ibid.

officers now regard as their primary mission – viz. Internal Security.’¹⁶ Indeed, as shown in the previous chapter, the view that the Colmil should modify its roles and missions and focus on the fight against local guerrilla and bandit groups was already present in the minds of many officers from the mid-1950s onwards. This was a factor which eventually facilitated the adoption of the tenets of counter-insurgency, as promoted by US and French sources, by those officers less resistant to the idea that the military should give priority to its domestic ‘public order’ mission, provided that a change in approach and tactics took place. For instance, already in 1956, a Lieutenant Colonel addressed a very candid letter to a Brigadier on his views on the Army’s general problems on issues of organisation, training and doctrine and complained that the tendency of copying US military practices observed in Korea were not only unrealistic for Colombia, but mainly counter-productive in dealing with the internal problems the country faced:

Is there a planning of our organisation? No. We are planning for Divisions that we cannot create. We have Brigades that do not correspond to our current military needs [...] We have been copying a lot from American organisation, but its convenience for our army has not been studied nor tested. We have created little and limited ourselves to translate badly many manuals that are applied halfway, with no judgment. [...] As a solution, I consider it wise to gather a group of prominent officers: specialists of all arms that combined with service schools and the Colombia Battalion, organised as experimentation unit, who would study the organisation of the army’s units and makes proposals, in such a way that they respond to our internal needs and adjust to our possibilities.¹⁷

At the height of *La Violencia*, local military thinking was ‘heavily influenced by the science and techniques of battles of annihilation, very distant from Colombian reality’, the official history of the army emphasises.¹⁸ According to this reasoning, the ‘conventional’ mentality of the Colmil during the Gomez era had reduced significantly the operational efficiency of the armed instrument in the conduct of the war against the liberal guerrillas. This view was to be

¹⁶ Howard C. Parker, Army Attaché to Milton K. Wells, Chargé d’Affaires, ‘Role of the Armed Forces’ Memorandum of Conversation, 2 May 1960, RG59 1960-63, 721.00114-1860 Box 1547, NARA.

¹⁷ TTE.COR Arturo Gonzalez Arcila a Brig. Gen Navas Pardo, ‘Un tema sobre el Ejército’, Diciembre 12 1956, Secretaria General, Fuerzas Militares, caja 2, carpeta 71, ff.273-278, AP.

¹⁸ Valencia Tovar (ed.) *Historia de las Fuerzas Militares*, p.170.

summarised by Joaquín Matallana, who as a Colonel in the early 1960s played an influential role in the change in the Colmil's *modus operandi*, and was convinced that 'irregularising' the army to face the domestic enemy's tactics was the crucial aspect to deal effectively with them.

[...] at that time [1950s] the Army was organised for regular warfare, for the fulfilment of its primary mission: the defence of the nation. For example, for every battalion there was a company of heavy weapons that mobilised its equipment on mules. Under the mentality of regular warfare, the troops crossed the cordilleras trying to transport the heavy weapons over them because it was demanded by the TOE. Obviously the result was negative because the guerrillas were more agile, they moved fast and the situation favoured their hit and run operations. We had begun at that time to adopt the patterns of the US army, due to the agreements that followed the Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, and this augmented the disagreements [over technique]. We were receiving a doctrine for regular warfare and it was completely different to the situation and needs of the Colombian army. [...] Slowly, it became necessary to plan and change our tactics in line with the requirements of irregular warfare.¹⁹

The reflections of many field grade officers over the technical corrections required to prevent past operational mistakes, only took hold with the consolidation of the Cuban revolution. Very soon they displaced the conventional-minded leadership of the Colmil and found themselves promoted to key positions where they could shape military policy, as their demands were in sync with the political priorities of presidents Lleras Camargo and eventually Kennedy's. Indeed, the success of Fidel Castro's guerrillas changed the regional strategic setting, directing the attention of the US military and its neighbours to the problem of 'unconventional' war.²⁰

The emphasis on the need for Latin American armies to design and apply novel methods for the application of force, was underpinned by the idea which had gained ground in influential segments of western military thought, that the nature of war was radically changing. A complete review of the norms of military thinking, organisation and tactics had to materialise to effectively contain the perceived threat communism posed with its intentions to export its revolution across the region following the Cuban model.²¹ In this respect, the belief that

¹⁹ Quoted in: Alape, *Testigos de excepción*, p.410.

²⁰ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.228.

²¹ Ibid.

‘unconventional war’ was a new norm, allowed Colombian officers to place the conflict they had been facing in a wider global context and assess its importance vis-à-vis other Western armies.²² Particularly, the writings of many high-ranking officers during the period were permeated by the tenets of revolutionary war theory, in the form promoted by French thinkers, and which helped locate the Colmil in the front line against a communist directed conspiracy to take over the free world by attacking targets of opportunity like Colombia. The apparent implications of this worldview in reassessing the role the armed instrument, were summarised in an editorial by the Chief of the Armed forces in 1962:

Communism has adopted ‘revolutionary war’ to take power in diverse countries, which is in many ways more economical and convenient for the Soviet Union than an atomic conflict. The circumstances of an atomic war would almost signify the complete destruction of the countries involved, which leads us to the conclusion that guerrilla war is the future, and hence, that conventional war is something of the past. While we must continue to study conventional war during some time, it will cede space to revolutionary war as it will be the scenario in countries where communism can use subversive means or guerrillas. [...] It is necessary that revolutionary war occupies the main place, and that we dominate all of its systems and procedures. Therefore, as we have said, we need a change of mentality that should make us consider reviewing individual basic training and the *Lanceros*, as they are primordial to make our soldiers excellent in waging guerrilla warfare. This change of mentality will also impact our operational planning and organisation of tactical units.²³

With these points in mind, the remainder of this section, as well as the following one, will centre on the way high-ranking Colombian officers who led the transition to counter-insurgency, reassessed the use and value of the military instrument. The apparent conceptual clarity of the theory in explaining the dynamics of violence in Colombia consolidated a conviction, particularly for those associated with the Korean tradition, that if its norms were correctly followed, counter-insurgency would be an effective formula to fight a new form of war.

These transitions in Colmil thinking started to gain momentum in late 1960 when President Lleras Camargo named Brigadier General Alberto Ruiz Novoa as army CoS, a former

²² For example see: Miguel Peña, ‘La misión del ejército’, *Revista del Ejército* Vol.1 No.1 (1961), pp.15-19; Bernardo Currea, ‘Las organización militar de una nación’, *Revista del Ejército* Vol.1 No.1 (1961), pp.21-26.

²³ ‘Notas Editoriales’, *Revista del Ejército* Vol2. No.7 (1962), pp.143-144.

commander of the Colombia Battalion in Korea. According to Colombian scholar Francisco Leal, Ruiz Novoa was the first to truly understand the extent of the counter-insurgency discourse and desired to operationalise it in Colombia.²⁴ ‘In September 1960, when I assumed the Command of the Army, violence was increasing in many parts of the country,’ explained the General in an interview after his retirement in 1965. ‘In my opinion our existing military organisation was inadequate for the type of struggle we were facing and various measures had to be taken.’²⁵ One of the first steps Ruiz Novoa took to transmit his views about the road the Colmil should take to adapt to the new way of war, was the inauguration of two academic journals: *Revista del Ejercito* (Army Review) and *Revista de la Fuerzas Armadas* (Review of the Armed Forces). The object of these publications was, according to Ruiz Novoa, to advance the ‘general aim of implanting a new institutional conscience, so that the Armed Forces could emerge from the political and intellectual prostration in which they had been traditionally kept’.²⁶

The new publications not only included original articles authored by his subordinate officers, it also included operational concepts designed by the staff of combat units as well as informative and training material produced by the US on diverse planning and tactical issues. How to wage *Guerra revolucionaria* became a popular subject of a great number of the articles that appeared in the military journals from 1961 onward. In most of them Colombian officers drew conclusions from the experience of the French in Indochina and Algeria, and attempted to establish lessons of general application, some of which however, were somewhat feeble and disingenuous. ‘Normally guerrillas do not face regular troops in open combat until they have an advantage, but isolated units like advanced posts or patrols can be sieged or blockaded,’ explained an operational concept published by an Infantry Battalion, which went on to affirm:

²⁴ Francisco Leal, *Estado y Política en Colombia*, (Bogotá: Siglo XXI Editores, 1984), p.208.

²⁵ Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*, p.119.

²⁶ Ibid, p.120.

‘We have not heard of a besieged unit that has come out victorious by opposing to its adversary, with no external support, a tactical defensive concept. The heroic but vain defence of Dien Bien Phu against the numerous forces of the Vietminh corroborates the axiom that only offensive action produces decisive results.’²⁷ Conversely, a report by the British military attaché in 1973, after a visit to the commander of the Vth Army Brigade in the department of Santander — which became the main area of operations against the ‘Castroist’ ELN insurgency — gives some detail on the impact of counter-insurgency operational concepts as utilised by other countries for the conduct of Colombian officers in the field:

His command group had studied various methods of anti-guerrilla tactics, particularly British and French. He said that, as I would know, they had been given considerable information about our methods in Malaya. But they had naturally been able to use as much of this information as could be applied to local conditions. It was really only tropical areas of Colombia towards Brazil that corresponded closely to Malaya conditions. In some ways the kind of physical conditions he had to cope with were more akin to the conditions faced by the French in Algeria. (He showed me some diagrammatic material from French sources showing various methods of anti-guerrilla tactics, including the use of helicopters in conjunction with operations on the ground designed to drive out the guerrillas into a small central area capable of being sealed off and attacked effectively). But he said, helicopters were hard to come by, even from the US, and while they had a few they were not sufficient to make really successful operations more than very occasionally possible²⁸

The Malayan emergency, was indeed, broadly studied by Colmil high-ranking officers to inform their operational ideas. For example, in an article advocating for the development of a ‘peasant self-defence’ mechanism in the Tolima department, the staff officers of a battalion with jurisdiction in the area discussed the costs and benefits of resettlement, following the example of the Briggs plan. ‘A necessary aspect when talking of self-defence is if the civilian population is going to be controlled in determined sectors as the English have done in Malaya,’ explained the report, which whilst considering resettlement as an ideal way to completely separate the population from the guerrillas, its final take was that it was unworkable in

²⁷ Batallón de Infantería No.17 General Caycedo, ‘Operación Contra Guerrillas’, *Revista del Ejército* Vol. II No.6, February (1962), p.46.

²⁸ ‘Colombia Internal Security,’ February 1973, Guerrilla Activities in Colombia, 1 January 1973 – 31 December 1973, FCO 7/2480, NAR Kew.

Colombia.²⁹ 'Such a system would require substantial expenditures by the state for the construction of housing and services in the concentration areas, the abandonment of cultivated farms and the opening of new work fronts to ensure the subsistence of the displaced families. It was possible for the English to do it, but it does not correspond to our environment.'³⁰ Apart from the academic study of the Malaya Emergency, the Colmil also received sporadic visits from British officials who liaised with the US military group and surveyed the unstable areas offering wide-ranging policy and operational guidance.³¹

Undoubtedly, it was mainly the veterans of the Korea war who were the conduit for an approach that emphasised the creation of specialised counter-guerrilla and intelligence units to fight the bandit and communist groups. These veterans made part of a select niche of cadres which, given their previous war experience, had established close contacts with fellow officers of the US army, and went on to be trained in their service schools. These relations predictably increased Washington's ability to influence Colombian military policy as well as the positive reception of an increased engagement in the country with a growing number of advisors via a Military Advisory and Assistance Group (MAAG) and Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) from

²⁹ Batallón de Artillería No.6 Tenerife, 'Reflexiones sobre el sistema de autodefensa de la población civil', *Revista del Ejército* Vol. II No.6, February (1962), pp.41-42.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ During the course of the archival research evidence was found that a handful of FCO officials visited Colombia from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s to advise mainly on police reform issues. These officials were working closely with US authorities. One notable case was that of an intelligence officer named Eric Lambert, who produced an extensive and very detailed activity report, which he shared with the US embassy after two visits to the country, one in October 1961 and a follow up in June 1962. The report listed a series of recommendations he had made to Colombian military and civilian authorities on how they could implement Malaya style methods. Lambert also details that he distributed propaganda material in Spanish produced by the Information Research Department of the FCO as well as copies of the 'Malayan Anti-terrorist operations manual'. He also expressed that after meeting with Colmil high-ranking officers at the Superior War School, they were keen on proposing the study of methods used in Malaya and to discuss how they could be adapted to the local conditions of violent areas. Curiously, Lambert noted that he had had 'a marked effect in bringing to notice the importance of Civil, as opposed to military action' in the fight against communist insurgency, whilst stressing that Colmil officers certainly mistrusted the civilians, as according to him they 'largely complained of the failures on the part of the civil and judicial authorities to cooperate'. See: 'Visit of Mr. Eric Lambert, Foreign Office Regional Policy Advisor to Colombia, May 23 June 26 1962,' Office of Public Safety – Colombia, 1957-1974, Miscellaneous 1962, NSA GWU.

late 1961. Some of the measures taken to implement the counter-insurgency model by General Ruiz Novoa following US advice, were, for example, changes in education and training to promote the study of 'unconventional' warfare, the reform of military intelligence and a reorganisation of the main operational units of the army to incorporate specialised combat units. In particular, an important aspect was to increase the profile of the *Escuela de Lanceros* (ranger school) created in 1955, and which was to become a laboratory for the whole spectrum of counter-guerrilla techniques. Originally, for the Colombians, it had not been clear if *Lanceros* were meant to be a ranger or commando force, and hence they failed to develop a clear framework to utilise them, viewing them simply as highly trained rifle platoons. This changed with the Korea veterans' focus on unconventional warfare. For instance, Colonel Joaquin Matallana, who returned from a stint at the Command and Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1959, was prominent in elevating the profile of the *Lanceros* so they could take the brunt of the responsibility in the fight against the insurgents and bandits in the central cordillera. Matallana encouraged a rugged training course in diverse anti-guerrilla tactics, promoted the formation of specialists in intelligence, especially interrogation and investigation, civil affairs and psychological operations.³²

Most of the organisational and tactical developments of the early counter-insurgency era were managed by the Brigade of Military Institutes (BIM) and the Army Command's Planning and Operations Department (E3). These were the Colmil's main units charged with planning and training purposes, and controlled all the schools and instruction centres.³³ A procedure was established by these units for operations that required a preliminary study of the areas to intervene in order to define an areas 'salient socio-economic characteristics,' to obtain detailed

³² Ramsey, 'The Colombian Battalion,' p.554.

³³ The BIM was by far the largest unit of the Colmil by the late 1950s, with a staff composed of 542 officers, 2722 NCOs and 6539 privates. In short, 25% of all the army strength. The BIM not only acted as the main army reserve, it also housed the Colombia infantry Battalion.

intelligence and define the lineaments for the approach to the population and the levels and type of force to be applied.³⁴ The first special counter-insurgency units to act in this fashion were referred to by Special Warfare experts at Fort Bragg, as intelligence-hunter killer teams. Following the template, they were to be composed by the personnel trained at the *Lanceros* School with the supervision of the MTTs. The first units became operational by mid-1962.³⁵ Officially termed as *grupos móviles de inteligencia localizadores* or GILs, they were better known by their code name *Flechas* (Arrows), trained to gather intelligence and act on it to reduce the field of action of the *bandoleros* which resisted President Lleras Camargo's calls for demobilisation. Drawing on the experience of the *Flechas* which acted at company level, a smaller, more agile spin-off known as *comandos localizadores* or *Arpón* (Harpoon) appeared in the most volatile regions of the central cordillera to act against the most ferocious of the *bandolero* gangs.³⁶ These units took advantage of air mobility with the introduction of helicopters, which slowly began to make their appearance in the country, as well as better communications systems to expedite response times, all of which were offered in great part by US assistance via a comprehensive Internal Defense Program approved by Washington in mid-1962, which was concerned with the growing levels of violence in the country.³⁷

Nevertheless, as the DoD survey team noted early in 1960, the growing awareness by local army officers about the technicalities of waging counter-guerrilla warfare, appeared to have created the impression that the *Lanceros* were the military solution to the problem of violence

³⁴ 'Apuntamientos y experiencias contra bandoleros', *Revista de Infantería*, No. 7 (1964), pp.13-15.

³⁵ See: Dennis Rempe, 'Guerrillas, bandits, and independent republics: US counter-insurgency efforts in Colombia 1959-1965', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 6: 3, 1995, p.308. As Jeffrey Michaels indicates, by 1962 the White House considered the situation in Colombia sufficiently critical to warrant the attention of the 'Special Group', a high level executive team responding to the President that monitored the situation closely and made recommendations to guide the effort of all US agencies in theatre. For more on Colombia and the Special Group see: Michaels, 'Managing Global Counterinsurgency', p.41.

³⁶ Jorge Arturo Coral, 'Operaciones y experiencias de la Compañía Flecha,' *Revista infantería* Vol 2 No. 3 (1962), pp. 44-51.; Alirio Salazar, 'La compañía Flecha', *Revista infantería* Vol.2 No. 4 (1962), pp.26-31.

³⁷ Rempe, 'Guerrillas, bandits, and independent republics,' p.326.

and stability in Colombia. ‘Properly used’, Lieutenant Colonel Koontz and his team went on to explain, ‘they will become a most valuable arm; but the only solution is a total effort of all the armed forces, the civilian government and the people’.³⁸ With hindsight, it is fair to say that the views of Koontz on the behaviour of many Colmil officers and civilian with regards to the *Lanceros* were highly accurate. His remarks evidenced what would become a chronic tendency in Colmil thinking: a fixation with military technique as a quick-fix solution to the conflict. Koontz went on to explain:

Steps taken are too small and uncoordinated. Each proposal, e.g. psychological warfare, helicopters, amnesty, etc., is treated independently by its proponents and pushed without regard to other proposals, as if it alone could solve the problem. Because of poor planning, organisation and administration at the seat of government, the heads of subordinate agencies there is no view of the inter-relationship and interdependence of their ideas and programs to others. There is a tendency to substitute a short range “gimmick” solution for a long-range program requiring constancy and sacrifice. Very often the inevitable result of the failure of one road, one time palliatives is disappointment and disillusionment. The inclination to substitute panaceas for a long-range broad view program which goes down many roads must be resisted.³⁹

As has been constantly stressed throughout the pages of this thesis, the preoccupation of many in the Colmil with technique has been a serious structural problem at the level of strategic formulation and decision-making since the early 1960s. In other words, ‘gimmick solutions’ as Koontz called them, have become a substitute for cohesive, balanced strategic judgement up to the present. Ironically, at the beginning of the counter-insurgency era in Colombia, the organisational and tactical developments introduced by the Koreans under the argument that they were the response to a new way of war, would actually serve to embolden many officers of the more traditional Prusso-German school of the Colmil once the communist insurgent groups of the FARC and ELN escalated the war in the second half of the decade. Many of these soldiers, who believed they were facing an irreconcilable enemy that had to be ultimately destroyed, assimilated the tactical developments as instrumental to improve the armed

³⁸ ‘Interdepartmental Survey Team to Colombia Preliminary Report (Minority), Joseph J. Koontz, Lieutenant Colonel, DOD Representative 1960 February 9’, Charles T. R. Bohannon papers, Box 12, HIA.

³⁹ Ibid.

instrument's proficiency. But as this thesis contends, many of these officers also considered counter-insurgency tactics as stand-alone solutions rather than as supporting tool to longer term policies that addressed the underlying causes of political instability.

'The *sine qua non* condition of victory in modern warfare' – Reappraising the Colmil's relationship with the population

The strategic challenge in revolutionary war, according to its proponents, was to achieve the control of the population. As Colonel Roger Trinquier put it, 'the *sine qua non* condition of victory in modern war is the unconditional support of the population.'⁴⁰ For the French thinker, the government and its military forces faced the same problems as the insurgents in terms of winning the support of the population. For example, support for the insurgents rarely came by spontaneously, despite the potency and accessibility of their ideology. Trinquier therefore considered that insurgents could attain it by intimidation and fear. Similarly, the government and its military forces also had to devise hard-headed measures to assure compliance of the population and to ultimately isolate the insurgents.⁴¹ This assessment served to reassert further the belief that the norms of war had radically changed, as the destruction of the adversary's forces or the conquest of territory had become irrelevant. The new battlefield was no longer physical but psychological.⁴² In Colombia, these precepts of revolutionary war theory became extremely influential in shaping the value-system of many of the Colmil officers that led the transition to counter-insurgency. A key officer in transmitting them was Colonel Alvaro Valencia Tovar, who clearly echoed Trinquier in his own writings of the early 1960s:

⁴⁰ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (London: Pall Mall, 1964), p.8.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.8. These set of ideas were also present in Galula's own definition of the theory. Trinquier's confrere formulated the 'first law' of counterinsurgency as the 'mobilization of a pro government minority against the insurgent minority which in turn hopefully demonstrates to a neutral majority that their cause is winning.' See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), p. 69.

⁴² Christopher Craddock and M. L. R. Smith, 'No Fixed Values: A Reinterpretation of the Influence of the Theory of Guerre Révolutionnaire and the Battle of Algiers, 1956–1957.' *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9:4 (Fall 2007), p.76.

[...]guerrilla warfare is no longer about articulating the manoeuvre of grand masses of men and material to find the strategic act that allows to impose one's will over the adversary. What it is about today is the invisible combination of psychological pressure, the managing of political forces, of ideological penetration over the minds of men.⁴³

After heading the Army Command's E3 department, under direct orders of General Ruiz Novoa, Colonel Valencia Tovar led, between late 1961 and 1962, the campaign against one of the guerrilla commands of the first Cuban influenced guerrilla group that operated in the country: the Student –Worker's Movement (*Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Colombiano - MOEC*). This group, which begun its subversive activities at the end of 1959, attempted to initiate 'focos' in the central cordillera and the eastern plains. It was easily defeated both in the urban and rural areas.⁴⁴ Valencia Tovar's operational success against the MOEC 'foco' in the eastern plains signalled his promotion by Ruiz Novoa to command the Infantry School in April 1962. This position allowed him to write frequently in the nascent Colmil's journals and to steer the publication of the army's first comprehensive counter-insurgency manuals, which, in contemporary parlance, emphasised a population centric approach rather than an enemy centric one. The material relied heavily on the doctrinal output of US military publications, which in most cases was conveniently translated into Spanish and adapted to Colombian operational needs with the guidance of the MAAG.⁴⁵ One of the crucial aspects from 1962 was the design of mechanisms to control the population, gain its support for the government, as well as build resilience in the face of constant intimidatory violence from rebel groups.

The requirement for a new approach towards the population was also built around the reaction to the brutal conduct of the Colmil during *La Violencia* which, as has already been discussed extensively, was considered by these officers to be one of the main reasons the

⁴³ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, 'Defensa nacional y guerra revolucionaria', *Revista de las Fuerzas Armadas* Vol.8 No.24 (1962), p.397.

⁴⁴ A short history of the MOEC is available in: Richard Gott, *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Oxford: Seagull Books, 2008), pp.222-226.

⁴⁵ See for example: Ejército Nacional, *Operaciones Contra Las Fuerzas Irregulares*, (Bogotá: Imprenta del Ejército) 1962; translation of FM 31-15 *Operations Against Irregular Forces* (May 1961).

military instrument had been ineffective in the past. In this respect, the campaign against the MOEC in the eastern plains was seen by Colonel Valencia Tovar as a turning point for the Colmil, because the lessons learnt in that theatre determined the germination of a new, more enlightened method to fight insurgencies.⁴⁶ With hindsight, however, it is fair to conclude that the MOEC did not present a substantial challenge to the Colmil in general. Moreover, neither did the campaign against it, particularly in the eastern plains exemplify the inauguration of a new model to fight insurgencies in Colombia or a major re-evaluation of the relation to the population.

The MOEC was founded by a small group of radicalised middle class university students who wanted to create a united revolutionary front with urban workers. In theory, the front would be led to victory thanks to the action of a rural guerrilla army that would be organised by the student vanguard. The leaders of the group left for Cuba in July 1959 where they received political and military training for six months to plan their scheme. In the end, these students proved to be inept, highlighting the often insurmountable divisions with Latin American leftist politics over ideology and the timing and methods of revolution, which invariably resulted in internal feuding that facilitated the work of the security services.⁴⁷ The urban cells of the MOEC were no match for the nascent Colombian intelligence and police

⁴⁶ His personal analysis of the consequences of the campaign for the Colmil can be found in: Álvaro Valencia Tovar, 'Tulio Bayer y la primera guerrilla comunista', in Martínez (ed.), *Hablan los Generales*, pp.37-73.

⁴⁷ The viability of the MOEC was in doubt since its inception due to what it would fair to define as insuperable ideological divisions. Even the whole Cuban influx and theory of foquismo, the view that revolution was a heroic action to be conducted by bold men, was a source of deep dispute for its members especially for those that had not been to the island. Many original members, disenchanted with the amateur leadership left the group after a few months, and some ratted out their former comrades. Raul Alameda, a veteran of the eastern plains revolution of the early 1950s, who joined the initial MOEC leadership, summed up the discontent in the following way: 'Serious men, Marxists that have spent long years of intense struggle, without any "revolutionary tourism" cannot lose time becoming the mistreated nannies of some egotistic and paranoid youngsters [...] These people don't admit the preparatory stages of insurrection, for them only empirical reality and spontaneity exist.' Quoted in José Abelardo Díaz, *Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Campesino y los orígenes de la nueva izquierda en Colombia*, MA Thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2010, p.104.

services, and were easily infiltrated at an early stage.⁴⁸ For example, the correspondence from Cuba of the leader Antonio Larrota, where he detailed his stay and discussed MOEC's future plans was intercepted by the intelligence services, which allowed the Ministry of War to direct its efforts to target the group.⁴⁹

In the rural areas, it was mainly the inherent mistrust of the peasants which facilitated the destruction of the armed *focos* the students of the MOEC attempted to initiate between 1961 and 1962. The basic failure that marked their demise was their unsuccessful attempt to recruit former Liberal guerrilla rank and file, or, to ally with those still active in bandit gangs. If not denounced to the Colmil by the locals, the armed peasantry they recruited took into their own hands to get rid of the MOEC cadres. For example, the *foco* in the mountains of Cauca was decimated in May 1961 when Antonio Larrota and his collaborators were massacred by one of the competing bandit groups of the area during a meeting organised between both parties to discuss the incorporation of the gang's rank and file to the MOEC. Apparently the bandit leader, a former Liberal guerrilla known as Aguililla, planned the execution of the students when he found out they had also been establishing contacts with an opposing bandit group.⁵⁰ The record that exists in the Colombian ministry of interior about this case shows the intricacy of the Colmil's operational task when dealing with the multiple armed groups that originated in the territory after the National Front. The record also shows that Colmil units had to consider conciliating or cooperating with some gangs to attack others according to local political

⁴⁸ The Colombian National Police and the Intelligence Service (Servicio de Inteligencia Colombiano - SIC) were created by the Rojas Pinilla regime, and under Lleras Camargo went through a structural reform process, eventually supported since 1962 by a wide-ranging Public Safety Program led by US AID. See foot note No.109 in Chapter 1. A history of the DAS can be found in: Douglas Porch, 'Taming a "Dysfunctional Beast"—Reform in Colombia's Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 22:3 (2009), pp.421-451.

⁴⁹ 'Informe sobre el comunismo', Despacho del Presidente, 1962, Caja 4, AP.

⁵⁰ Díaz, *Movimiento Obrero Estudiantil Campesino*, p.104.

considerations and the allegiances of the local populace.⁵¹ After news spread of his death, Larrota's family denounced the national authorities declaring that the culprits were not detained by the Colmil nor the Police, even though the gang leader Aguililla who was well known in the area, was seen in the officers' company during the judicial inspection to remove the massacred bodies. Although vague and unclear at times, the affidavit of the Lieutenant who commanded the local army outpost is extremely revealing of the problems faced by company level officers in the field and their appreciation of counter-insurgency methods:

I did not capture him the day we went uphill offering security to the police inspector, as during the course of the month I had been having meetings with the aforementioned Aguililla to agree on plans to capture or kill the *cuadrilla* commanded by a certain Tijeras. Then my plan was to proceed, after this objective, against the gang of Aguililla and in that fashion to diminish the violence in my jurisdiction. The former, I was doing knowing that this method, of the many used in the counter-guerrilla war, has given magnificent results.⁵²

According to the local conditions many Colmil units would attempt to pitch individual gangs against each other and turn a blind eye, reach temporary cease fire agreements, or place them at their service as trackers, for example.⁵³ This behaviour was criticised in various instances. For example, the Prosecutor General in a letter to the President in 1962 expressed his concern with the situation with the Tenerife Battalion in the departments of Huila, as the commander had apprised to him during an inspection that the command policy in the jurisdiction was: to 'maintain the existing equilibrium between the armed gangs.'⁵⁴ According to the Prosecutor, the Battalion commander had to act in accordance to the political preferences of the local authorities, who gave strict orders not to persecute some gangs operating there, as they were being protected by chieftains who considered them 'bastions' against the gangs of neighbouring regions. 'The Colonel abstained from disclosing the exact origin of the

⁵¹ 'Testimonio Teniente Guillermo Escobar, del Batallón de Infantería N° 7, "Junín", n.d, Ministerio de Gobierno, Despacho del Ministro 1961, caja 21, carpeta 185, AGN.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ José Jairo González, *El estigma de las repúblicas independientes, 1955-1965* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1992), p.109.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

instructions I refer to,' wrote the Prosecutor, 'but if the military continues to proceed in a discriminatory manner, it is going to be very difficult to finish off the foci of violence that exist in the department; all the more since these groups of anti-socials do not fight amongst them, but limit their activities to the murder and pillage of defenceless peasants that do not have anything to do with politics.'⁵⁵

For their part, the efforts against the MOEC *foco* in the eastern plains, which was commanded by a physician named Tulio Bayer and Antonio's brother, Ramon Larrota, proved to be a greater challenge for the Colmil than that of the central cordillera. The location of this *foco* in the frontier region of Vichada, where the government's presence was tenuous and where support could arrive via Venezuela through the Orinoco River, ran parallel to the history of rebellion in the area after the events of 9 April 1948. The authorities considered that these factors played to the insurgent's advantage. The population of Vichada was primarily composed of indigenous tribes and squatters who had arrived there displaced by *La Violencia*. This included experienced former guerrillas who had confronted the Gomez regime, all of whom augmented the anxieties of the government in Bogotá. When news arrived of the presence of MOEC guerrillas there in late 1961, the Ministry of War responded by dispersing the already overstretched units available in the eastern plains throughout the villages of Vichada, an area of more than 100,000 km². Evidently, the Colmil's dispersion assisted the hit and run tactics of the insurgents. In September 1961, in a bold action, the guerrillas overwhelmed the only outpost in the jungle village of Santa Rita in the Orinoco delta, which was manned by 18 marines of the Colombian Navy. In response the Colmil decided to increase its footprint by deploying the Colombia Infantry Battalion in the area adjacent to the Orinoco,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

and executed an operation under the command of Colonel Valencia Tovar with the objective of eliminating the *foco*.⁵⁶

Colonel Valencia Tovar's analysis of the success of *Plan Ariete* (Plan Battering-ram) in Vichada was that it was made possible only by a combination of enlightened methods towards the local population with a more measured use of force. According to Valencia Tovar, positive results were possible due to the application of a sequenced operational formula that allowed the separation of the insurgents from the population. His reading, was that by prioritising cordial relations with the local population, including a commitment to protect them and their property from acts of violence, and an assessment of the local conditions to discern basic socio-economic needs that could be solved by the soldiers ultimately facilitated the isolation of the guerrillas. Once rooted out, the Colmil's specialised combat units could easily target, or simply starve out the guerrillas, keeping them constantly on the run with no access to resources. This approach would demoralise them and force their rank and file to surrender or to look for refuge in frontier areas.⁵⁷ According to Valencia Tovar, three clearly defined phases designated as 'isolation, destruction and consolidation' guided the approach in Vichada. Supposedly, this was an operational concept that resulted from the Colombian 'development of its own military doctrine, to be applied to unique and particular conditions' given that the way in which 'guerrilla warfare is waged in our soil under the label of *violencia* is different to that which can occur in any other part of the world,' argued Valencia Tovar in his memoirs.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The US embassy praised Colmil given the operational challenges. They commented the operation was planned and mounted with precision and alacrity, despite the great distances of the region, 340 nautical miles from the eastern plains capital of Villavicencio to the Orinoco, and the 'paucity of suitable aircraft' to mobilise a whole battalion, as the Airforce only counted with 8 transport aircraft (6 C-47s a C-54 Skymaster and a PBY Catalina). US Embassy to DoS, 'Coordinated Operation Against Guerrillas in Eastern Llanos', 13 October 1962, RG59 1960-63, 721.00W/ 8-560 Box 1545, NARA.

⁵⁷ As a result of the offensive, MOEC operatives were forced to cross the border into Venezuela, and even had to look for refuge as far as the Brazilian amazon jungle due to the Colmil pressure. See: 'La banda de Bayer se refugió en Venezuela', *El Tiempo*, 18 October 1961.

⁵⁸ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p. 412.

Obviously, this is was a misreading by Valencia Tovar, who read the actions in Vichada through the lens of doctrinal concepts that only made their appearance in Colmil thinking after the defeat of the MOEC, chiefly with input from US military assistance which advised Colombian military planning in a more comprehensive manner after the approval of an official Internal Defense Plan in the summer of 1962.⁵⁹

Another point Valencia Tovar continuously made in his writings, whilst asserting the campaign against the MOEC as a model counter-insurgency effort, was that the tactical innovations the Colmil began to implement significantly improved its performance, but that they were only partial to its success. Almost five decades after the operation in Vichada, the Colonel would still underline that *Ariete's* philosophy was that persuasion would be more important than force', reasserting that it was a conflict of unique character by echoing the counter-insurgency creed he defended in the early 1960s: that 'it was a war that had to be waged by penetrating the hearts and minds of men.'⁶⁰ However, the historical record available today allows us to establish that Valencia Tovar's *ex post facto* views and justifications were somewhat romanticised, and that the actual isolation of the insurgents in Vichada often required heavy handed actions towards the population. In fact, the starting point of the operation was not very dissimilar to the one the Colmil had used during the eastern plains campaign of the early 1950s to separate the population from the rebels by dropping leaflets to warn of an imminent offensive action and exhorting 'honest citizens' to leave the area, expecting in the words of the US embassy, a 'showdown fight with the estimated 150 guerrillas and their 1000 armed local sympathizers'.⁶¹ The key difference with the Gomez era, however, was that there was no threat of punitive action against those who remained, rather assurances of protection

⁵⁹ Dennis Rempe, *The past as prologue? A history of US counterinsurgency policy in Colombia, 1958-66*, (Carlisle Barracks PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), p.15.

⁶⁰ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, *Mis adversarios guerrilleros*, (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2009), p.43.

⁶¹ US Embassy to DoS, 'Coordinated Operation Against Guerrillas in Eastern Llanos', 13 October 1962, RG59 1960-63, 721.00W/ 8-560 Box 1545, NARA.

and safe conduct to enable the military offensive.⁶² A massive displacement of a fearful population, predominantly squatters that had had an association with the eastern plains rebellion of the 1950s, could not be prevented. This population controlled the region's rice cultivation which was the basis of the local economy, and so, led the Colmil to round up available men and force them to work to save the harvest.⁶³

Notwithstanding what the historical record can tell us today about the real extent of the Colmil's conduct against the MOEC and the *bandolero* gangs at the onset of the 1960s, and how disingenuous Valencia Tovar was in his justification of the methods used, it is this mode of interpretation by the Korean section, highlighting counter-insurgency as a special category of war that required progressive thinking, which gives insight into the way they thought about themselves and understood the value of force. For example, by arguing that the campaign against the MOEC had been the manifestation of a new way to deal with armed rural rebellion, which offered long lasting lessons for the partial development of 'a doctrine for the understanding of the causes of the conflict', is what in Valencia's Tovar judgement, offered the Colmil's leadership of the time the underpinnings for a 'proper strategic framework to guide its action,' in opposition to the short-sighted conventional approach of the traditionalists.⁶⁴ What Valencia Tovar was referring to, was the Colmil planners' efforts, under the sway of General Ruiz Novoa, to come up with a comprehensive explanation of the complex nature of the conflict. As argued in Chapter 2, this resulted in the development of the theory for the deactivation of the causes of violence as a basis to re-evaluate the role of the armed instrument, fitting with the priorities of the Rehabilitation agenda of the Lleras Camargo administration.

⁶² The US authorities commented that whilst the propaganda leaflets appeared to 'have served the purpose of placating and separating the local citizens' it had also 'warned the guerrillas of the necessity to escape' which increased the challenge for the pursuit operations. See: US Embassy to DoS, 'Coordinated Operation Against Guerrillas in Eastern Llanos', 13 October 1962, RG59 1960-63, 721.00W/ 8-560 Box 1545, NARA.

⁶³ 'Visita practicada a las Comisarias del Vaupés y del Vichada,' Despacho Ministro Gobierno, Caja 18, Carpeta 164, F.13. AGN.

⁶⁴ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.380.

The causes of violence theory of the Colmil would shape its counter-insurgency approach during the mid-1960s, under the assumption that all the groups had the same social roots and that they deployed the same methods to achieve their goals, be them political or financial. The core element of the theory was that the identification of the objective or imagined grievances that made Colombian peasants assist local bandit gangs, or find the communist insurgent's discourse appealing, was the primary step in correctly laying down the procedures to isolate these groups from the population. Following from this, the officers who accepted this line of thought considered that force had its limitations, or at least that it had to be used discriminately. In this regard, comments to the press by some unit commanders, when asked about their opinions on the role of the military instrument in their respective areas of operation, conveyed messages like: 'military action to confront a problem as complex as la violencia must change according to the circumstances to avoid becoming a routine.'⁶⁵ Or 'I have preached among the peasants the advantages of peaceful relationships, but at the same time I have combined this with energetic military action...this is the only way to eradicate the tendency – very frequent among peasants- to consider guerrilleros their protectors, when all legitimate authorities go into a crisis.'⁶⁶

In a seminal article titled 'Revolutionary War in Colombia,' the executive officer of the BIM, Colonel Enrique Ruano, explained that the challenge for the Colmil was to outsmart the tactics used by the local agents of international communism, who promoted instability by fomenting the appearance of all type of irregular groups which exploited the penurious socio-economic conditions in the country side to create havoc and guerrilla war. To curtail them, it would be necessary to advance a repertoire of immaterial and material actions directed to manipulate the structure of incentives of what he believed was a biddable population:

⁶⁵ These statements by soldiers are from 1961 and 1959 respectively. The first is attributed to Valencia Tovar. Both are taken from the newspaper *La Patria* and are quoted in: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.177.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Colombia is one of the countries with the highest rates of illiteracy. Our masses just have one or two years of basic schooling. It can be deduced that they are in conditions to sympathise with communism and offer it their support given the circumstances. Let us remember that communism, as it was well described by Colonel Lacheroy, “starts like the Genesis: in the beginning there was nothing,” and has to work with minorities that form illegal revolutionary fronts to exploit the conditions to make the masses embrace their ideas [...] Once the factors that determine the masses’ support for revolutionary war have been studied, the problem is to search for the causes and mobiles that can produce an adverse effect to their morale and criteria, and so to displace them from the wrong road they have taken. We have to remember that in revolutionary war, the main problem is not to destroy the rebel bands: problem number one is to dominate the population, as the one who achieves this has already won.⁶⁷

A main contention that underpinned this line of thought was that solely focusing on *Acción Militar* (military action) the Colmil would only attack the consequences of violence, and so, force was rendered incapable of delivering strategic results. As colonel Ruano Monzon explained, ‘for an anti-revolutionary, anti-communist, anti-guerrilla action or its equivalent to succeed, MILITARY ACTION IS NOT ENOUGH [emphasis on original]; it indispensable for all the live forces of the nation to contribute to the success of the campaign, to correct the social, economic and moral factors that produce violence.’⁶⁸ Clearly, the idea that there was a lack of structured national effort, or what today is commonly referred in specialist literature as a ‘comprehensive approach,’ to deal with the conflict and prevent the encroachment of communism was a fundamental anxiety of the Comil that began to be voiced more publicly in the context of the escalation of violence since 1962. It was even voiced by General Ruiz Novoa, who despite praising the efforts of the Lleras Camargo administration, began advancing a deeply politicised discourse in which he argued that the reason violence intensified was precisely because of the lack of national response in addressing structural causes. To his mind, the guilty party was the ‘political class’, who were actually fostering the conditions for conflict and underdevelopment with their politicking, consequently he made public calls for the politicians to resolve their differences to permit the effective pacification of the country and

⁶⁷ Enrique Ruano Monzón, ‘La guerra revolucionaria en Colombia’, *Revista del Ejército*, Vol. 2 No. 10 (1962), pp.761-762.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.761.

foster the conditions for its modernisation.⁶⁹ The transit to modernity should become the country's 'National Purpose', explained Ruiz Novoa, who despite the strong political nature of his views, was not considered a competitor by Lleras Camargo. In fact, the Army CoS was in tune with the President's view on the perceived benefits of economic development, assisted by the military instrument, as the correct means to solve the conflict and contain communism. In this sense, there was agreement that the rehabilitation effort should have continuity as a state policy unconstrained by partisan divides. Despite Ruiz Novoa's political rhetoric, it can be suggested that his call for a clear definition of a 'National Purpose,' was nonetheless an essential step to formulate a workable strategy to address the conflict. To begin with, it would help define the goals to be achieved, the type of means and the level of effort required: 'If we esteem the national purpose as the ultimate end pursued by a nation, we see that its achievement is intimately related to the use of the armed institution [...] the doctrine of National Defence will be inspired in the national purpose.'⁷⁰ Still, given the disagreement generated by Ruiz Novoa and his Korean clique' supporting ideas that placed the Colmil at the centre of the country's political life, doomed the possibility of generating a workable and sustainable strategic course of action. Many politicians would come to argue that the General espoused a populist discourse that turned them into scapegoats in a simplistic narrative about the causes of rural violence and the expansion of insurgency. Meanwhile, many within the ranks would also complain about the General's strategic priorities, which apparently converted the Colmil into a social welfare agency, and not an efficient fighting organization to deal with a security problem.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*, p.120.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The analysis of the divisions within the Colmil over the emphasis of Ruiz Novoa on grievance management as a solution to the conflict will be the central element of the remaining sections of the chapter. However, a brief description of these tensions is important at this stage. In an interview in 1991, General Ruiz Novoa briefly summarised the criticisms of the Colmil's senior ranks to his policies: 'The philosophy of our plans was to "remove the water from the fish", that was, to withdraw the peasant's support for the guerrilla. There were many

The following section will address in more detail the diverse sources of the modernisation narrative in the early 1960s, and assess its influence in Colmil thinking for the reappraisal of its mission in the conflict and the formulation of strategy, in particular how it emphasised grievance management as the key element in dealing with the conflict.

The Colmil and modernisation - Rehabilitation and The Alliance for Progress

President Lleras Camargo was part of the left wing of the Liberal party, and so believed that development and industrialisation required substantial levels of state intervention to ensure fair distribution of wealth and to avoid further social turmoil and violence.⁷² Moreover, he thought that to alleviate the war-torn countryside, socio-economic initiatives that improved the life standards of the peasantry would fundamentally deal with the issues of land tenure and help deescalate the sources of insurrection.⁷³ This narrative was extremely appealing to the officers of the Korean school because of its apparent simplicity and clarity in explaining the causes of violence in Colombia. It seemed to offer a correct framework to guide the action of the Colmil, particularly towards obtaining the unequivocal support of the peasant population, which was considered the centre of gravity of the counter-insurgency effort.⁷⁴

tactical innovations, like *grupos localizadores*, but military civic-action was more important than combat. Military civic action was a formidable experience, but the General staff did not understand the matter, and said that the army did not exist to remove bad teeth and fix shoe soles.' Quoted in: Leal, *El Oficio*, pp.81-82.

⁷² Alberto Lleras, *Escritos Selectos*, (Bogotá: Colcultura, 1976), p.111.

⁷³ Undoubtedly Alberto Lleras Camargo was ideologically aligned with the Kennedy administration, and hence the smoothness reception of the Alliance for Progress initiative. Lleras Camargo was sympathetic of the US Democratic Party. As interior minister of President Alfonso Lopez in 1934, the second Liberal to break the hegemony of the Conservative party, amidst the Wall Street crash; Lleras was instrumental in the implementation of social reforms in the spirit of FDR's New Deal. Later, as part of the economic assistance offered by The Alliance for Progress, Lleras Camargo championed the development of Colombia's agricultural and mineral resources through two autonomous government corporations, the Cauca Valley Authority and the Magdalena Valley Authority, modelled on FDR's own Tennessee Valley Authority. Assistance by US AID to these authorities promote by Lleras was to be used to finance rural penetration roads in these areas, to be constructed in great part by the Colmil and former-guerillas, with the objective of incorporating the rural periphery to the national economy, by increasing access to the markets, and stimulating agricultural production. See: Agency for International Development, *Proposed Regional Programs for Fiscal Year 1963, Volume III: World Wide Summary The Alliance For Progress, Near East and South Asia*, Confidential, April 29, 1963, p.58.

⁷⁴ Leal, *El Oficio*, pp.81-82.

A key foundation for this line of thought were the findings of the Commission for the Study of the Causes of Violence. Set up by President Lleras Camargo in 1959, the final report became something of a mandatory text that served as the basis of the Koreans counter-insurgency theorisation on the need to reconsider the instrumentality of force to manage violence. As it was expressed by Augusto Ramirez, leader of the Commission and later interior minister during the first year of the Lleras Camargo administration:

[...] Is it possible that a problem with such complex roots admits a unilateral response? Furthermore, is it logic that such a solution might come from the Armed Forces, which for many years have uselessly tried to contain an avalanche unleashed by forces cosmically superior to their limited resources? The Republic, the nation, public opinion, cannot expect from its armed instrument a solution which it is not in capacity to offer. And this is so because the armed gangs are only a manifestation of deeper causes, which if not combated in their origins, will continue to produce the same effects. The elimination or capture of a score of anti-socials does not help prevent that a number twice or thrice larger surges from a mad youth ready to follow the path of crime.⁷⁵

Moreover, the findings of the Commission also asserted that violence in the country had escalated during the 1950s because of the government's policy to favour the use of excessive force, which had clearly alienated the population. For that reason it exhorted that the Colmil should regain the trust of the peasantry and redress their concerns. In a similar tone, the observations of French priest Louis-Joseph Lebreton, 'Economy and Humanism' mission to Colombia, became an important influence in shaping further the theorisation of the Colmil in terms of grievance management. More precisely, it led to the diffusion of the civilising mission within Colombian military thinking. Both the scope and content of these two sources as long-term drivers of Colombian military mind have already been discussed in Chapter 2, but let us now look at how they originally manifested themselves in the context of Lleras Camargo's Rehabilitation policy, which provided the impetus for the adoption of the population-centric counter-insurgency narrative by 1962. The President explained the nature and extent of his policy in his first report to Congress in the following terms:

⁷⁵ 'Reflexiones sobre la Violencia', Fondo Secretaria Privada, 15 May 1961, Caja 4, APR.

[Rehabilitation] has begun to be tested in the departments with high levels of violence, and where the state of siege still exists, adapting the policy to each region's modes of violence and basing it on past lessons, most of them sour. First, the policy parts from the unequivocal recognition that no Colombian, or maybe with a few exceptions, does not have something to repent from in terms of direct or indirect contribution to this great catastrophe. Second, it cannot be true that hundreds of thousands of countrymen converted to banditry and the brutal life of guerrillas simply out of pleasure, or a sudden perversion of the Christian sentiment of the people. Because of these, we saw that repression with no reasonable discrimination, nor opportunities to recover peaceful coexistence, would simply increase evil. At the same time, we recognised that a full, non-qualified, amnesty, would not do anything but give a passport to peoples that cannot regenerate, and that it is necessary to hand to justice and isolate from society. [Amnesty] is discriminate and qualified, and is only obtained after filling out a request and with confirmation from relevant authorities that there are reasons to think that it is demanded for the honest purpose of rehabilitation. The goal is to give opportunities to these individuals so they can find a way to return to honest and productive work, and that they do not feel driven to return to the mountains and arms due to a mistrustful and hardened society affected by loss of life and property. One of these opportunities has been to employ them in public works, to pave roads through those regions where they found banditry and guerrilla warfare, and where authority did not have any access in many years. Like that, we can imagine that, by the time the harvests arrive and farms have been re-established, these peoples will find salaries, doctors, tools and bank loans to complete rehabilitation [...] Certainly it is not going to be a permanent policy, and the country does not have the resource to extend beyond a few years. But I do not have any regrets about the principles that guide it or of the way in which it has been developing. My conviction is that without an effort to rehabilitate the people and the areas affected by violence, many more years of tragedy await and it may be impossible to eradicate it.⁷⁶

In broad terms, Rehabilitation was founded on the recommendations of the 'Commission for the study of violence' and the work of Father Lebret, specifically with the intention of implementing a series of social and economic programmes to favour the pace of development as a solution to rebellion. In particular, it reintroduced the state-building mission of the Colmil which had been dismissed with the fall of Rojas Pinilla. According to Lebret, the Colmil had to be placed unequivocally 'at the service of the people', moving away from the partisanship of La Violencia and the corruption of the military dictatorship. The Colmil had to selflessly assist the government in the implementation of development policies. For this to happen, Lebret explained, a change of mentality at all echelons of the Colmil was required that broadened the spectrum of the military profession and made available a pool of enlightened men. These two points were seen as essential prerequisites for modernisation:

We wish to insist on the optimal use of the armed forces to insure harmonious development, in particular with regards to the prompt establishment of infrastructure, the preparation of technicians

⁷⁶ 'Informe al congreso, 20 julio 1959,' Quoted in: Villegas (ed.), *Alberto Lleras: Antología, Tomo IV*, pp.367-369.

at all levels for the exploitation of the territory and the cultural elevation of the ensemble. In other words, the armed forces of a developing country do not only have a defensive function. They must be, according to the eminent French rural economist Jean Marius Gatheron “an army creator.”[...] The modern soldier is no longer a performer of manoeuvres rigidly defined in manuals, who executes drills and exercises to perfection. From now on, an army’s worth is its technical level and capacity to adapt. Young enlisted men have to be trained in the great works that are required for the installation of fundamental infrastructures: roads, railways, irrigation, drains. Far from harming their military qualities this training can increase them considerably, but only if officers and non-commissioned officers are also prepared carefully. To conceive an officer as a man isolated from the great problems of the Nation, does not have any sense whatsoever today. A modern officer has to be a highly capable technician, who since military school receives a multipurpose⁷⁷ training [...] Like this, the army will have superior and selfless men at its disposal whose role in development will be extremely favourable, and who will ensure the coherence and homogeneity of development initiatives in new colonisation zones.⁷⁸

It was not only the Lebret study which saw soldiers as agents of social change. The discourse developed by the Kennedy administration’s Alliance for Progress initiative, which was also based on modernisation theory placed the same onus on them and legitimised the Colmil leadership’s views. Launched on 13 March 1961, the Alliance for Progress was a vast programme of cooperation planned for a period of ten years with measures seeking to promote economic development and welfare in order to address the social and political conditions that could spark communist revolution.⁷⁹ If the strategy of containment in Latin America required carrots and sticks, explains Lawrence Freedman, the carrots would come via the Alliance, the stick in the form of covert action and military assistance.⁸⁰ The positive reception of the Alliances’ philosophy in various Latin American countries was obviously facilitated by the fact

⁷⁷ The literal term in Spanish in the text is “polivalente” (polyvalent) not multipurpose. Following Lebret’s recommendations, to begin with the execution of rehabilitation programmes in violence torn regions the government had to organise *Equipos Polivalentes* (Polyvalent Teams), composed of military personnel supported by civilian experts in diverse areas, like agriculture, health or urbanism. As instruments of stabilisation these teams were no more than an experiment of ‘government in a box’, using the contemporary term coined by General Stanley McChrystal. Indeed, the spirit of Polyvalent Teams bore a resemblance with US Provincial Reconstruction Teams created for the Afghanistan war. In the final analysis, given the ultimate failure of Rehabilitation, and bearing in mind the faith placed by Lebret in the ability of soldiers to act as agents of social change, one can also point out that the teams suffered from the flaws such technocratic ‘government in a box’ initiatives face when attempting to reduce politics to a question of good administration and development, as it has been carefully argued by Colin Jackson. See: Jackson, ‘Government in a Box?’, pp.98-104.

⁷⁸ Misión Economía y Humanismo, *Estudio sobre las condiciones del desarrollo de Colombia*, (Bogotá: Presidencia de Colombia – Comité Nacional de Planeación, 1958).

⁷⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars. Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*, (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p.124.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

that it went in line with the policy priorities of governments that were following a *desarrollista* agenda, with similar theoretical parameters, such as was the case of Arturo Frondizi in Argentina (1958-62), Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela (1959-64) and Lleras Camargo in Colombia.

The execution of the resources and implementation of the development programmes of the Alliance for Progress was the responsibility of the national governments, which predictably turned to their militaries. These had indeed the organisation, the means and manpower to assist in delivering the Alliance's objectives. 'For the United States, our Armed Forces cannot continue as simple spectators', declared one of the editorials of the *Colmil* journal endorsing the state-building mission: 'they should intervene and support in ample form the plans that the government points towards modifying the economic and social situation of the country.'⁸¹ Furthermore, underpinned by modernisation theory, counter-insurgency thinking would also serve to argue that the militaries of the region were the main actors in the implementation of development programmes. As voiced by President Kennedy, Latin American Military forces in support of the Alliance for Progress would endeavour to become 'a tool of democracy to prevent the arrival of communism'.⁸²

Colombia became one of Washington's most touted platforms of the Alliance for Progress. It received almost \$1bn in aid whilst the scheme was in effect, which amounted to roughly 11 per cent of the whole package.⁸³ In strategic terms it was a logical candidate as positive results could be expected at a low cost and without serious political risks, granting credibility to the venture. In the first place, beyond the effects of violence, which were mostly focused in peripheral regions, Colombia had a limited but consolidated democratic system of government,

⁸¹ 'Las Fuerzas Armadas y el Plan Kennedy'. *Revista Fuerzas Armadas* Vol.4, N.10, October (1961).

⁸² William Rosenau, 'The Kennedy Administration, US Foreign Internal Security Assistance and the Challenge of 'Subterranean War', 1961-63', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 14: 3 (2003), p.74; Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 4.

⁸³ Stephen Randall, *Colombia and the United States* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1992), p. 231.

an emerging middle class, as well as a functioning bureaucracy capable of implementing public policy. Moreover, the violence stricken country was paradoxically benefiting from a steadily growing economy (growth rates reached almost 6 per cent annually from the early 50s), and by the end of the decade, it also possessed a growing if incipient industrial base.⁸⁴ Its challenges were mainly in the rural areas, where inequality was more pronounced, with pre-modern social structures and a severe concentration of land. The Alliance could help Colombia boost its already existing economic development and aid in a better distribution of resources whilst addressing the existing problems in the rural periphery. The enthusiasm of Kennedy's administration was such that the President flew to Bogotá in December 1961 where he witnessed the signing by Lleras Camargo of an Agrarian Reform law.⁸⁵ In terms of security, the prospects by late 1961 were even better, as US officials reckoned the country was not a victim of general communist subversion, and considered existing armed groups far from being a threat to Colombia's national survival. In short, they were perceived as a source of instability that with correct measures could be managed. In April 1962, for example, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, after being briefed by the Embassy and the Chief of the Military Mission, concluded that violence in Colombia, apart from being limited in territory, was mainly banditry involving complex motivations rather than communist insurrection. The country, in his words, was not suffering of 'guerrilla activity in the technical sense of that term.'⁸⁶

The ideas of modernisation theorists like Walt Rostow, endorsed the view that the military should radically change its mind-set and assume a progressive role to assist in the 'take off to modernisation.'⁸⁷ President Kennedy publicly commended Latin American senior officers as a 'new generation of military leaders' that showed 'an increasing awareness that armies cannot

⁸⁴ Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, p. 220.

⁸⁵ Henderson, *Modernization in Colombia*, p. 391.

⁸⁶ US. Embassy to DOS, 10 April 1962, RG 59 1960-1963 721.0014-1860, Box 1547, NARA.

⁸⁷ Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, p.151.

only defend their countries - they can, as we have learned through our own Corps of Engineers, help to build them.’⁸⁸ Likewise, these ideas served to reaffirm the conviction that violence in Colombia had a manifest social character. Paraphrasing Ruiz Novoa, it was produced mainly by an unequally distributed economic development, which during the climatic years of *La Violencia*, had been eclipsed by ‘irrational partisan struggles’ and had prepared the ground for the expansion of communism.⁸⁹ Hence, the best way to bring Colombia on to the right path was to stabilise the countryside through the active promotion of development policies and the improvement of the population’s well-being. A problem, however, as Michael Latham has pointed out, is that modernisation theory as an ideology turned the analysis of social change into a particularly rigid template, which presented ‘sweeping economic and political reform as matters of simple volition and reiterated profound sense of manifest destiny’.⁹⁰ Modernisation theory made high-ranking officers like Ruiz Novoa envision themselves as part of a profoundly altruistic, humanitarian missionary effort. A policy implication of such an attitude resembles what Colin Jackson has referred to as the ‘technocratic conceit’ of counter-insurgency. That is, the belief that politics can be reduced to virtuous administration and public works applied by institutions staffed by competent bureaucrats, who wield resources to strengthen a state and restore order.⁹¹

In the context of the Alliance for Progress the search for a ‘national purpose’, as emphasised by General Ruiz Novoa, would translate in to the definition of a state-building mission for the Colmil, following the precepts of modernisation theory. In the words of Ruiz Novoa the military should be shaped into a tool ‘to aid civilian efforts to promote industrialisation and modern agriculture and to repair the social institutions damaged in the long period of

⁸⁸ ‘Address by President Kennedy at a White House Reception for Latin American Diplomats and Members of Congress, March 13, 1961’, *The Department of State Bulletin*, XLIV, No. 1136 (April 3, 1961), pp. 471-474.

⁸⁹ Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*, p.26.

⁹⁰ Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, pp.72, 91.

⁹¹ Jackson, ‘Government in a Box?’, p.104.

violence.’⁹² The mission was materialised in Colmil’s planning by raising the strategic importance of the concept of Civic Action, which was to be devised by the leadership not as a simple tactic to gain the support of the population during the execution of their counter-insurgency operations, but as the central means to achieve the modernising goals by altering the socio-economic conditions that generated violence and spawned insurgency.

Because of his seniority, General Alberto Ruiz Novoa was promoted to War Minister in August 1962, in time for the inauguration of President Guillermo Valencia. From that position, he attempted to elevate the strategic importance of the concept of *Acción Cívica-Militar* (Military Civic Action - MCA) based on his earlier theorisation. This operational concept was in essence described as a model for peaceful penetration in bandit controlled areas. But, the crucial point, is that for the General the tactic had a greater significance than merely winning the population over in the fight against the armed groups, as was emphasised in US doctrine. In a conference of Latin American armies at the Panama Canal Zone, General Ruiz Novoa explained his appreciations on the value of MCA, based on a fuller understanding of the premises of revolutionary war theory: ‘Pope Paul VI has said “we have to sow ideas” as the best way to confront the communist threat. Within this position is where Military Civic Action fits. Although it is clear that war still is the continuation of politics by other means, the “modus operandi,” has changed amongst us.’⁹³ In essence, the concept was seen as the materialisation of a civilising mission in support of the development of the country. The ‘Koreans’ made evident the wider scope of MCA, and the aims it intended to achieve, in an Army doctrinal manifesto of 1962:

We call *Acción Cívica* the activity the Army can carry out with the end of improving the living conditions of the people. Its objective, apart from improving the living standards is to attract the people to the Army, awake in the civilians their trust in the men in arms and obtain the collaboration of the people of good will in the fight against the anti-socials that scourge vast regions of the country [...] This new mentality is of exceptional importance and means non else than a NEW MISSION [emphasis on original] for the Army. The mission of aiding the most vulnerable sector of the

⁹² Ruiz Novoa, *El gran desafío*, p.82.

⁹³ Ibid.

Colombian population, fulfilling it next to the other two it already has of upholding national independence and safeguarding the institutions. A NEW MISSION that incorporates the institution in the process of economic development of the nation, turning it into the Army Creator. Economic development requires mature institutions that function as its foundation, and no other institution is more appropriated than the Army for this end.⁹⁴

But how did the Colombians formulate the tactic and how did they adjust it to their strategic considerations? According to Colonel Valencia Tovar, the inception of MCA was part of a ‘Colombian theory vis-à-vis revolutionary warfare’ rather than an imposition from ‘the Yankee military mission,’ as he argues local historians have portrayed the country’s adaptation to counter-insurgency.⁹⁵ In his memoirs, he insisted that the US influence on the definition of the concept was limited. It was the Colombian’s involvement with ‘rehabilitation’ since the Rojas regime, its later evolution under Lleras Camargo, and the Colmil’s theory of addressing causes of violence, which ultimately gave shape to a strategy based on promoting social and economic initiatives in violence-stricken areas. Valencia Tovar even asserted that the Colombian operational experience of the early 1960s, for example the campaign against the MOEC in Vichada, provided as input for the elaboration of such population-centric concepts in US counter-insurgency doctrine. That experiment drew the attention of the US Army,’ he argues, ‘which immediately decided to study it in depth, to analyse the possibilities of applying it in perturbed areas.’⁹⁶ He concludes the anecdote with the bold affirmation that: ‘Later, after visiting the School of Special Warfare at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, I had the chance of seeing the process converted into an action plan for counter-insurrectional methodology, under the name Civic Action.’⁹⁷

Back in 1963, in one of the articles of the *Revista del Ejercito*, the Colonel did indeed emphasise that the country had to ‘develop its own doctrine to be applied to unique and particular conditions’ as the way in which ‘guerrilla warfare is waged in our soil under the label

⁹⁴ ‘La Acción Cívica. Cómo cumplirla,’ *Revista del Ejercito* Vol. II, No.9, August (1962), pp.501-503.

⁹⁵ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p. 412.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of *violencia* is different to that which can occur in any other part of the world.’⁹⁸ But, his *ex post facto* vindication of MCA as a Colombian concept was manifestly disingenuous. The fact is that the US had been devising, since the time of the Drapper Committee, the use of the military in countries vulnerable to communism in a ‘constructive role in economic development projects.’⁹⁹ Moreover, the concept, under the terms Civil Action or Civil Development, had also been wide use since the late 1950s by Colonel Edward Lansdale, a guru of irregular war who promoted the idea in the evolving counter-insurgency doctrine of the US. From 1960, US manuals established it as a support task to be undertaken by indigenous military forces.¹⁰⁰ The earliest adoption of the concept in Colombia and its association with the US, can be traced back to September 1961¹⁰¹ when Brigadier General Jorge Quintero, commander of the III Brigade operating in the department of Valle, instructed his battalion commanders to undertake *Accion Civica* programmes and public relations efforts with the peasant population in the north of the department, adjacent to the bandit-infested Tolima, so as to prevent the expansion of violence into his area of operations. The instruction recognised that the main problem for the Colmil’s pacification effort was not only the distrust of the local populace towards the soldiers, but the lack of support of the local authorities, like judges, school teachers and priests due to their partisan biases. The document, copied in a dispatch from the US Embassy to the Department of State, was considered to be an ambitious but still ‘heartening’ and ‘constructive development’ on the part of the Colombians, which showed that ‘highly

⁹⁸ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, ‘Cómo conducir un campaña de Acción Cívico Militar,’ *Revista del Ejército* Vol. 3, No.16, (1963), p. 897.

⁹⁹ Dennis Rempe, ‘An American Trojan horse? Eisenhower, Latin America, and the development of US internal security policy 1954-1960’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 10: 1 (1999), p. 42.

¹⁰⁰ For more information on Lansdale promotion of the concept of ‘civil development’, see for example Michael Latham’s description of the Colonel’s analysis of the combination of force with social engineering in the Philippines during the Hukbalahap rebellion. Latham, *Modernization as ideology*, p.168; To observe how Civic Action was defined as a support task for indigenous militaries according to US doctrine see: Department of the Army, *FM 31-31 Guerrilla Warfare and Special Operations*, (Washington DC: GPO, 1961).

¹⁰¹ That is, whilst Valencia Tovar was still fighting the MOEC in Vichada, and at least six months before he was sent for training at Fort Bragg (He was sent to the US for training in March 1962 according to his own account).

placed military men' were demonstrating initiative in developing 'programmes of action' directed to wipe out a long relationship of mistrust of the population towards the Army.¹⁰² However, Quintero's instruction was nothing resembling a programme. It was, in the end, no more than a list of twenty concise points including exhortations for the good conduct of the troops, like 'respect the honour of local women and private property', and other vague and bucolic recommendations based on naïve assumptions, such as: 'the Army should be an intermediary between peasant and the civil authority in order to bring to the latter's attention to the needs of the peasant. The expectation is that the peasant will look on to the Army as his disinterested benefactor,'¹⁰³ or simply: 'visit schools, meetings, games, etc., in order to win over the youth, and convince them that the military rather than the local bandit leader is their friend and protector.'¹⁰⁴ Whilst Colmil leaders like Valencia Tovar could have envisaged Civic Action as the solution to the underlying causes of revolutionary war, the concept was in its early days, as evidenced in a doctrinal manifesto of the *Revista de Infanteria* and transcribed in Figure 7, an appeal for a change in the military's disposition. For officers, Civic Action signified, in short, a more 'humane action' towards what was considered to be a vulnerable and backward rural population.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: Counter-insurgency theory and revival of state-building in Colmil thought

This chapter showed how the Colmil reassessed the role of the armed instrument amid the rise of counter-insurgency theory. The theory offered a new understanding of the nature of the conflict, the limits of force and the importance of controlling the population. A main driver of

¹⁰² US Embassy to DOS, 'Colombian Army Civic Action Program to Combat Violence', 21 September 1961 7205611/12-462 RG59 1960-1963, Box 1544 NARA.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ N.a, 'Guerra irregular. El enemigo, la solución,' *Revista de Infanteria* Vo.2 No.4 (1962), pp.10-12.

the Colmil's ideas during the early 1960s was modernisation narrative, which in the context of Lleras Camargo's Rehabilitation agenda and Kennedy's The Alliance for Progress, revitalised the military's state-building mission and the Colmil high command to elevate the strategic importance of the concept *Accion Civico Militar* (MCA).

As will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter, support for MCA throughout the 1960s was all but unanimous in Colombia. The concept found enemies in the civilian realm as well as within the ranks, becoming a serious object of political contention throughout the decade. It found champions and opponents on both sides of the political spectrum. Liberal and Conservative politicians who were in agreement with the spirit of the modernising agenda of Lleras Camargo, were not resistant in giving a wider state-building role to the Colmil. Conversely, Conservatives who had tense relations with the Army since their government had been victim of the military coup in 1953, considered that the concept of MCA politicised the Colmil and giving them political clout in the areas where they intervened. In particular, as the next chapter will describe, politicians felt such activities led to an improper intervention of the military in political affairs that broke the lineaments of the 'Lleras doctrine'.

Tensions within the ranks were also fierce, reaching their pinnacle by 1965 when Ruiz Novoa was forced into retirement. The political visibility of MCA and the defence Ruiz Novoa made of it, portraying it as the main line of effort, became a subject that divided the Colmil leadership between those that supported a state-building approach versus those who voiced the need to restrict the army's action to the purely military suppression of banditry and insurgency, rather than performing what for them were mere civilian tasks.¹⁰⁶ In short, it was the fundamental issue that marked the breach between the 'Koreans' and the 'Traditionalists'. For the latter, *Acción Civico Militar* should be utilised as part of the preparation of the battlefield,

¹⁰⁶ 'El Nuevo Ejército,' *La Nueva Prensa*, 23 October 1962.

as a means to gain support of the population for the Colmil and facilitate the flow of actionable intelligence to improve the application of force. As Ruiz Novoa's successor, General Gustavo Ayerbe Chaux, bluntly remarked in 1966: 'against *bandoleros* and rebellious inhumane individuals the only solution is efficacious fire arms.'¹⁰⁷ 'Traditionalists' could not contemplate MCA as the principal effort of the military. Eventually, by the end of the 1960s, the concept was demoted, thereby marking a break with the early strategic formulation which was promoted by Ruiz Novoa, and with long-standing repercussions for the Colombian military mind, as the final chapter will elucidate.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.173.

CHAPTER V

PRESCRIBING COUNTER-INSURGENCY - THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY AND THE ORIGINS OF FARC, 1962-1966

The first major operational test for the counter-insurgency innovations the Colmil had been developing at the onset of the 1960s was *Plan Lazo* (Plan Moose). Initialised in May 1962, it was a five-phase programme that attempted to synthesise the main components of the ‘new way of war’ and was originally expected to finally pacify the country in a period of 12 months. The implementation of the plan took place during the second government of the National Front when Major General Alberto Ruiz Novoa, Army CoS during Lleras Camargo’s administration, became War Minister. The General and his staff had conceived the plan with close guidance of the US military mission. In this sense, *Plan Lazo* was in great part a product of the visit that spring of 1962 of a second US assessment team headed by General William P. Yarborough, commander of the School for Special Warfare. One of the main conclusions of the Yarborough team was that there was a lack of planning and coordination for the unconventional warfare capabilities the Colmil had been accruing in the past two years; a vital deficiency the plan aimed to fix. US assistance for the implementation of *Plan Lazo* included a US\$1.5 million in equipment enhancement, including vehicles, communications, and helicopters; intensified training by MTTs and the dispatch of Colombian personnel to the Panama Canal Zone to train in the US army run ‘School of the Americas.’¹

Eventually *Plan Lazo* proved to be an effective tool for the neutralisation of the most tenacious bandit groups across the central Andes. Its sustained execution up to early 1965 substantially improved the security conditions of the coffee-growing departments of the Central cordillera. By the end of 1964, for example, 13 gangs led by captains with aliases like “Black blood,” “Sparks” or “Poker” were dismantled in well organised and executed operations

¹ For a detailed description of the Yarborough team recommendations and the specific material offered by the US to implement *Plan Lazo* see: Rempe, *The past as prologue?*, pp.11-25.

utilising the whole assortment of counter-insurgency tactics.² With the threat of *bandolerismo* greatly reduced and the popularity of the armed forces soaring, the attention of the Government shifted to the self-governed communist enclaves or communes that dated from the 1950s. But fundamental disagreements about the character and intentions of the irregular groups active in the country impaired the Colmil and the civilian leadership from developing a consistent understanding about the role and limitations of force.

For the Colmil under Ruiz Novoa, the communist self-defence groups, *bandolero* gangs and eventually the insurgencies that developed with revolutionary agendas were all considered to be symptomatic of the same problems of lawlessness and the economic and social contradictions dating from *La Violencia*. It was believed that the supposedly identical origin in political, territorial and social terms of these groups determined why they employed the same methods for the application of violence (i.e. guerrilla warfare). And, whilst the Colmil and civilian authorities could agree that the methods for the application of force, population control and grievance management of counter-insurgency were all adequate instruments to confront the modus operandi of all these groups for the remainder of the decade, there were evident differences in terms of intent, resulting from confused and mixed motivations harboured by the Colmil and the politicians. This posed major problems for the development of strategy. It was extremely difficult to define what had to be achieved via the counter-insurgency apparatus due to the lack of a clear understanding of the challenge the self-styled communist guerrilla groups posed. Whilst the mode in which the groups decided to fight was manifestly clear for the authorities, elucidating the reasons and motivations why they were fighting was a source of

² According to statistics of the Colombian government of 1964 quoted by Sanchez and Meertens, that year 312 *bandoleros* were killed or captured by the Colmil and the Police in the coffee-growing region (departments of Caldas, Tolima and north of Valle). By mid-1965, only 88 bandits were killed or captured in the same region, showcasing the decline of the banditry problem. Compare these statistics to the estimated number of active gang and members for the year 1962 quoted in the annex (Figure 4). For more information on the decline of banditry see: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.173.

contention. For example, it was convenient for some politicians, like President Guillermo Valencia, to declare the groups as ‘dissident elements acting in guerrilla bands, which sack, pillage and murder without cause or reason.’³ The intention was to close the door to any conciliation with them and hence distance himself from the Rehabilitation policy of his predecessor. As late as 1968, Colombians were still at odds when it came to categorise the groups they were facing. In an extensive report for the DoD on the conditions of insurgency, the US country team could not do any better in terms of explaining the character of the problem, and simply pointed out that the guerrilla warfare in Colombia had a ‘quicksilver nature’, and added that ‘[t]here is a difficulty in Colombia in distinguishing between guerrillas, insurgents, bandits, etc. The Colombian Armed Forces refer to them all as *anti-sociales*.’⁴ What lurked beneath the problems of categorisation was a muddled analysis, product of differing ideological motivations of political leaders, but also within the Colmil.

To recapitulate, whilst the success of the Colmil against the *bandolero* gangs by 1965 contributed a sense of infallibility of the operational developments contained in *Plan Lazo*, that is, a conviction that they could be effectively employed against all groups, differing ideological motivations led to different appreciations of the role of force. In this respect, for the Conservative government of Guillermo Valencia and the traditionalist sector of the Colmil, a highly proficient armed instrument could finally offer a military solution, by extinguishing the enclaves and ultimately defeating all the groups that employed guerrilla tactics. As it was bluntly put by a Tolima congressman, during the climax of Plan Lazo: ‘If the crusade against these bandits has shown us something today, is how naïve the attempts to rehabilitate them by offering money to start a decent living were. Kill the bitch, end the mange.’⁵ Following this

³ ‘Valencia makes inauguration address,’ *Bogota Domestic Service*, 7 August 1962. Accessed via FBIS.

⁴ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Notes on Current Internal Security Situation in Colombia’, 29 October 1968, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Pol 2 Col to Pol 7 Col, Box 1991, NARA.

⁵ ‘Opiniones’, 15 October 1962.

line of thought, rural bandits and communist self-defence forces were considered by many in Colombia to be manifestations of the same existential threat dating from the 9 April 1948 rebellion, one that could only be dealt with through punitive action.⁶ A similar reasoning was employed when the second Castroist influenced guerrilla, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), made its appearance in the country in 1964. Based on the Manichean partisan logic of *La Violencia*, imbued by the strong anti-communism of revolutionary war theory, the idea that ‘anti-socials’ were irreconcilable enemies intensified within this section of the military. Conversely, after the exit of Ruiz Novoa in 1965, the remnants of the Korean school of the Colmil were still wedded to the view that the persistence of problems of poverty, landlessness, and inequality would require ‘political measures’ to solve the ‘structural material causes of insurgent violence in the country.’⁷ As presented in the previous chapter, the theory of causes of violence and the civilising narrative of much of the development ideas that had captivated the ‘Koreans’ since the presidency of Lleras Camargo, led from 1964 to a demand for an extension of Civic Action to deal with the areas prone to guerrilla warfare. In this sense, the main consideration was that a great deal of the ‘anti-socials’ could be coerced into compliance, and that the threat of communist inspired insurgency would be reduced if life standards increased and objective socio economic grievances were solved. But this could only happen if, in the view of Valencia Tovar, the ‘indifference of the government stopped’, and committed itself to the execution of a sustained ‘integral anti-violence action’ and increased resources for the implementation of state-building initiatives, which had until then depended mostly on US aid.⁸

⁶ ‘La minoría de violentos no podrá dominar el país,’ *El Tiempo*, 2 October 1962.

⁷ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp.416-417; A contradiction in Valencia Tovar’s writings, is that whilst he constantly refers, by citing Clausewitz, to war as continuation of politics. In his defence of MCA and the social-origins of insurgency in the country, maybe unintendedly, he gives violence (i.e.: the application of force) an apolitical character, in opposition to what he calls ‘political measures.’

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 420-423.

With these ideas in mind, the central argument of this chapter is that during the mid-1960s, the Colombian military promoted an over prescriptive view of counter-insurgency as a panacea to deal with the myriad of guerrilla groups that arose in the period, and which ultimately pre-empted the formulation of balanced strategic judgement. In other words, counter-insurgency brought about a posture of determinism, which held that all insurgencies had discernible characteristics as a result of a similar social context in which they originated, matching recruitment and support bases and the adoption of the same methods for the application of force.⁹

To systematically assess the Colmil's practice of counter-insurgency during the period, the chapter is divided in two parts. The first reviews the Colmil's development of *Plan Lazo* and the attitudes towards *bandolerismo*, emphasising the tensions between the understanding of the utility of force and the political conduct of the war. In particular, it will analyse the struggles of the Koreans to prolong the development and grievance management tools of counter-insurgency, in opposition to the views of traditionalists which called for a more assertive use of force via inventive tactics to look for a quick victory against the rebels. Differences of opinion over the correct application of the instrument stimulated power struggles within the leadership and with civilians. Following from this, it will be possible, in the second part, to establish how the Colmil's behaviour facilitated the development of the FARC by 1966, resulting from the campaign against what were referred to as the communist enclaves or 'independent republics'. This analysis will address the debates over the application of the counter-insurgency apparatus that ensued with the consolidation of not only FARC but

⁹ The core tenet of the present chapter is based on the argument developed by M.L.R. Smith that the overly prescriptive nature of counterinsurgency is due to a general rejection of Clausewitzian first principles. This posture advances the view that an adversary's behaviour is predictable depending on the way he decides to fight and so that it can be countered with a pre-ordained plan. But as Smith argues, following the Prussian philosopher, the character and direction of war is unpredictable as the calculus of belligerents vary according to the variation of a multiplicity of material and immaterial factors –that is the interplay of the trinity of passion, reason and chance. See: M.L.R. Smith, 'COIN and the Chameleon', pp.47-49.

also the ‘Castroist’ ELN. In this respect, the chapter will examine the impact on Colmil attitudes produced by the changing posture of the Colombian government towards the conflict, as well as the review the threat of Communist insurgency in Latin America and the change in policy priorities of the US.

The Korean strategic outlook - *Plan Lazo* and the politicisation of the Colmil

The main assumption of the ‘Korean’ school was that violence in Colombia was the result of continuous social and economic contradictions that determined the underlying values that shaped the behaviour of all irregular groups that appeared since 9 April 1948. According to the War Minister General Ruiz Novoa, violence in Colombia had a visible political-partisan origin, but the erosion of the rule of law and of state authority, fomented by the ‘apathy and indolence of the political class’, had created stimuli for its growth and for the influx of communism.¹⁰ The General explained in his first report to Congress that ‘three genres’ of violence could be identified in the country: first a ‘political violence’ perpetrated by partisan warlords who used force to alter the course of local elections by attacking the constituents of the other party, or in his words ‘winning elections by killing the votes;’ second an ‘economic violence’ that employed terror tactics to forcefully take control of productive land, essentially the coffee harvests in Quindio and Tolima; and thirdly a ‘social violence’ that manifested itself in outright banditry. However, with respect to the latter type, General Ruiz Novoa had been clear since his time as Army CoS, expressing that it was violence perpetrated by individuals who knew nothing but banditry, and so the only solution in sight was to end it by force.¹¹

On the face of it, these reflections from the recently nominated War Minister came as a result of the deterioration of security by mid-1962, which was blamed on the failures of the

¹⁰ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Violence: The great “debate” in the Senate’, 27 August 1962, RG59 1960-63, 720.5611/1246-462, Box 1544, NARA.

¹¹ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Army chief discusses violence’, 6 May 1961, RG 59 1960-63, 721. OOW/8-560, Box 1545, NARA.

amnesty programme of Lleras Camargo, which had been the backbone of rehabilitation agenda.¹² Indeed, when the Liberal president left office in August 1962 there was a visible growth in banditry as well as a resurgence of Communist leaning guerrilla groups that had rearmed on the pretext of self-defence. With increasing acts of mass murder or pillage and with ambushes against military and police units occurring systematically across the central cordillera in the final months of the first National Front administration, Colmil leaders began to be criticised by politicians of both parties who declared that it lacked an offensive spirit and was not effectively combatting the armed groups.¹³ Moreover, they complained that their ideas on the socio-economic causes of violence were encouraging the military to intervene in politics.¹⁴ In this respect, hard-line politicians denounced that the Colmil should initiate a ‘war with no quarter or possibilities of truce against *bandolerismo*’,¹⁵ instead of being distracted by a theory which was considered to run against the military non-deliberation spirit of the ‘Lleras Doctrine’.

Evidencing the loss of confidence in the strategy of Rehabilitation implemented by the previous government, the incoming Minister of Justice in August 1962 Hector Charry, stated in the Senate that ‘he was tired of hearing theories on the origins of violence, because what was needed was concrete solutions.’¹⁶ For the Minister, the past measures of rehabilitation and amnesty were ‘of little use’ and had to be ‘discarded’ as extending them ‘would be an excess

¹² According to data of the US Embassy, 1962 was the deadliest year since the denouement of *La Violencia* after the National Front accord in 1958. With 2909 people killed in conflict zones. See: US Embassy to DoS, ‘Deaths by violence in December 1962,’ 23 January 1963, RG59 1960-63, 721.OOW/8/560, Box 1545, NARA.

¹³ For example, even Liberal daily *El Tiempo*, which was normally pro-Lleras was critical of the Colmil: ‘Are the soldiers failing or is it the means employed to conjure the growing and terrible wave of violence? [...] It seems the army only goes to pick up the corpses and not prevent further deaths.’ Quoted in ‘Editorial,’ *El Tiempo*, 4 October 1961.

¹⁴ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Violence: The great “debate” in the Senate’, 27 August 1962, RG59 1960, 63, 720.5611/1246-462, Box 1544, NARA.

¹⁵ Quoted in: Ortiz, *La Violence en Colombie*, p.46.

¹⁶ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Violence: The great “debate” in the Senate’, 27 August 1962, RG59 1960, 63, 720.5611/1246-462, Box 1544, NARA.

of magnanimity which the bandits do not deserve.’¹⁷ The solution to violence would require giving the government powers to make judicial and penal reforms, particularly to make martial law more efficient in violent regions where states of emergency were in place and exceptional penal procedures to judge the bandits were needed. In his mind the Colombian ‘judicial process was in confusion and was actually aiding the bandits’ as the ‘codes gave everything to the defendant and very little to the prosecution.’¹⁸ Paraphrasing this reading, the view of some cabinet ministers of Valencia, in opposition to Ruiz Novoa, was that the country was facing a law and order problem which required an improvement in the punitive instruments of the state. Obviously, such a policy would require an expansion of prisons and interment facilities, for which the Valencia administration, amongst other judicial measures, decided to suit Gorgona Island (an inhospitable jungle island 22 miles off the Pacific coast) to house 1/3 of the 25,000 inmates convicted of banditry and who were jamming the only 163 prisons of the country.¹⁹ Despite the fact the Minister of Justice was supposedly tired of hearing ‘theories on the causes of violence,’ the decision to go forward with such a policy was also based on particular ideas about the nature of the conflict. Of particular influence for many Colombian hard-line politicians, was Horacio Gomez’s book ‘*Gorgona Theory: Causes of violence in Colombia and the structuration of a system to end it*’ which was published at the outset of the Valencia administration and which argued against the premises of the material causes of violence championed by Ruiz Novoa and the Lleras Camargo administration. According to Gomez: ‘the peasants that resorted to violence were innately aggressive, and could only be fought with their own weapons;’²⁰ which meant that no rehabilitation was possible, and what could only be managed was to select groups of prisoners at Gorgona and train them to function as counter-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Martz, *Colombia survey*, p.300.

²⁰ Horacio Gómez Aristizabal, *Teoria Gorgona: causación de la violencia en Colombia y estructuración de un sistema para acabarla*, (Bogotá: Editorial Iqueima, 1962), pp.53-70.

guerrillas where the conflict escalated, but that in the long run they could not be reintegrated into civilian life.²¹

In short, this intense political antagonism in Congress and cabinet circles with the departing government's policy reflected in pressure for the Colmil leadership to act more vigorously on all fronts. But Ruiz Novoa was still wedded to the notions of the social and economic causes of violence. Hence he claimed that it was not possible to leave the Colmil as the sole institution responsible for handling the conflict. He was adamant that the employment of military force directed towards the neutralisation of the armed groups was a limited function that only dealt with the effects of the problem. In other words, force was considered only to be a palliative capable of generating any long standing results. So, a balanced counter-insurgency would require a correct application and sequencing of three other techniques that would complement Military Action (*Acción Militar*), directed what he considered were the roots of violence, not its effects: Psychological Action (*Acción Psicológica*), Civic Action (*Acción Cívica*) and Communal Action (*Acción Comunal*). These techniques were the basis, in his view, of *Plan Lazo*. But by late 1962, General Ruiz Novoa was not alone in his analysis. There were still some voices, although mostly in private, of other cabinet members who considered the need to have a 'comprehensive' approach to deal with violence, based on Rehabilitation. Attorney General Andres Holguin, for example, confided to the political officer of the US embassy that whilst he agreed with the Minister of Justice's analysis that the Colombian judicial system was in bleak state, and that rampant impunity was a stimulant of violence, distinctions had to be made, and no blanket solutions could be crafted. Agreeing with Ruiz Novoa, for the Attorney General there was an 'apolitical type' of violence which was the most grave as it was 'perpetuated by the absence of official justice, as well as by social and economic ills in the rural areas' that occurred in parallel to one pursued by political motives that 'laid principally

²¹ Ibid.

at the feet of international communism.’²² In terms of the solutions offered by the Colombian official, the US diplomat summarised:

Holguin stated that opposing violence with official violence, another state of siege or greater military mobilization would not resolve the problem. Although military action alone would partially succeed, to completely eradicate the problem it was necessary that the Executive, the Congress, the military, the police and the judiciary coordinate their direct efforts and at the same time look for adequate indirect measures e.g. Alliance for Progress, social agrarian reform, education, judicial reform, in order to complete the pacification campaign. Holguin also stated that the re-institution of the death penalty for assassins had no relevance to solution [sic] of the violence problem since the bandits already live under a de facto death sentence by their own election.²³

Certainly, for the Colmil leadership under Ruiz Novoa, the *bandolero* groups whose loyalties were only loosely tied to one of the two political parties, and who used party labels to profit from extortion and pillage of either Liberal or Conservative citizens were the main source of violence. All these groups maintained support amongst the population by offering protection from possible counter-reprisals.²⁴ Indeed, Ruiz Novoa in his report to Congress expressed that the most intractable difficulty in dealing with the problem was ‘collective complicity, that is, the peasants’ solidarity with the *bandoleros*.’²⁵ For the General, despite the permanent repudiation by the party directorates and leaders, ‘solidarity continues like a deep sea in the countryside where the *bandolero* is considered a sort of hero.’²⁶ General Ruiz Novoa explained in his speech that the way forward would require effective measures to separate the population from the bandits, introducing the congressmen to the logic of the population centric concepts of counter-insurgency. For the Minister of War population centric counter-insurgency could also be used against the bandits, given that their *modus operandi*, blending in with the population, was that of Communist guerrillas:

Psychological action is intended to destroy the guerrilla warfare phenomenon valued by Mao Tse-Tung, perhaps the leading exponent of the topic, as an indispensable [element] for the success of

²² US Embassy to DoS, ‘The Attorney-General reports on Justice and Violence’, 24 August 1962, RG59 1960-63, 720.5611/12-462, Box 1544, NARA.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ruiz Novoa, *El desafío*, p.33.

²⁵ Quoted in: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.194.

²⁶ Ibid.

this type of campaign when he says that guerrillas should move “between the people and the region where they operate like fish in the water”. This psychological action tries to remove the water and destroy the fish.²⁷

With the above in mind, John Henderson wrote that the psychological component of Plan Lazo included the typical information and propaganda activities. Its core facet was the offering of rewards for information leading to the arrest of the bandit leaders. Psychological action also included parading from village to village the bodies of the most wanted bandits killed in combat and which were transported on the landing skids of helicopters. Apparently, such was the pressure generated by helicopters, that ‘Desquite’ one of the most skilled and deadly bandits, after escaping the pursuing army units complained that ‘it wasn’t proper for President Kennedy to send aircraft to kill people instead of money for the poor.’²⁸

For its part, Civic Action had by mid-1962 a robust basis in US doctrine, its operational relevance rising in line with the Kennedy’s administration reasoning about the improvement of living conditions as pivotal elements for the containment of communism in the third world. The first edition of the ‘Guide for the planning of Counterinsurgency’ of November 1963 published by the Special Warfare School at Bragg, was translated into Spanish and used for the training of Latin American officers at Panama Canal Zone or in situ by the MAAG’s and MTTs, was one of the first publications to present to that audience the concept in all its doctrinal

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Henderson, *Modernization*, pp.399- 400; ‘To some persons in the ground,’ also writes Henderson, ‘the helicopters suggested birds of prey clutching hapless creatures in their talons.’ Indeed, the psychological effect of helicopters, on both the Colmil as well as the bandits and guerrillas and not least the population has been consistent. The Colmil has historically seen them as the most important asset to wage the war, initially during the 1960s and later with the escalation of the conflict in the mid-1990s. With the advent of Plan Colombia the influx of helicopters, financed by the US, have been seen as vital in terms of increased mobility, to facilitate deployment of troops and reduce the ability of the guerrillas to attack in places and moments of their own choosing, but also, as a substantial ‘power to hurt’. Particularly the arrival of modern attack helicopters since 2002 and the development of elaborate close air support capabilities have pushed many of the most kinetic minded Colmil officers to consider that the ‘war is won from the air’. See for example the statements to the press of the first commander of the Army Air Branch, General Javier Rey, after the Colmil’s successful offensive against the FARC’s main HVT’s and who were all neutralized via airborne actions: Stefanie Matiz, ‘La Guerra desde los cielos: Para el comandante de la Aviación del Ejército la guerra contra la guerrilla se gana desde los cielos,’ *El Espectador*, 31 March 2012. Available at: < <http://www.elspectador.com/noticias/judicial/guerra-los-cielos-articulo-335588>> Accessed June 10 2015.

splendour. That publication which most certainly was on Valencia Tovar's reading list, and where he probably saw what he considered were originally Colombian ideas, devoted a whole chapter to an A to Z guide to plan and implement an MCA programme.²⁹ As with all counter-insurgency manuals, the tactic was presented as a template to be presented by US military advisors in any host nation, through a Jominian interpretation of counter-insurgency, considering it to be informed by unchanging fundamentals. One of the supposed unchangeable aspects of counter-insurgency is what current practitioners would define as the onus of 'ameliorating the existing contradictions within the targeted society.'³⁰ But while counter-insurgency doctrine as thought by the US to the Colombians offered a specific set of tactics and operational advice to construct a perfect campaign to co-opt the local population; it would rest on the sagacity of the local soldiers like the Korean school in Colombia, to give the concept a strategic dimension, with their own understanding of the politics and underlying values that shaped the conflict.³¹

Undoubtedly, Ruiz Novoa and Valencia Tovar enriched US operational concepts with the political and ideological considerations that shaped their strategic thinking and could be traced to the escalatory years of *La Violencia*. Mainly, their narrative on the 'causes of violence' and their notions of the limitation of the use of armed force, served as the pivot for the development of the tactic. In the words Colonel Valencia Tovar, the tactic was above all a procedure to 'address the sources of evil in its origins, and not only in its dire consequences.'³² And clearly, underlying these assumptions was the belief that the Colmil had to fulfil a civilising mission through it to prevent the triumph of the communists and their 'dissociating

²⁹ Ejército de los EE.UU, *Guía para el Planeamiento de la Contrainsurgencia - ST 31-176* (Fort Bragg: USASWS, 1963), pp. 81-100.

³⁰ John A. Nagl & Brian M Burton, 'Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Modern Wars - A Reply to Jones and Smith', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33: 1 (2010), p.126.

³¹ Jones & Smith, 'Grammar but No Logic', p.439.

³² Valencia Tovar, 'Cómo conducir una campaña', p. 897.

ideology'³³ as well as to 'readjust a society maddened by a fight with no senses' as the Koreans referred to *La Violencia*. In this sense, *Acción Cívica* was not to be mere Christian charity; it was an enterprise to alter the mentality of the people after winning their allegiance leading them through the path of progress. This belief was evidenced in the Colonel's writings.

The basis for the success of the [MCA] Campaign is the effective link of the civilian population to the constructive effort of the Army. *Acción Cívica* must not take in any case the form of hand-outs, which would encourage and negligence. On the contrary, what must be used are stimuli able to awaken the eager for progress, enthusiasm, healthy competition, elevate human dignity and produce conscience that a better life is available for all, even for the less favoured.³⁴

The tactic, at the end, boiled down to an attempt to implement the 'enlightened methods' for countering rebellion practiced by the French colonial army, that, as Douglas Porch explains operated with a faith in 'a vision of man as a rational being in the Idea of Progress.'³⁵ Like the French 'improvers' of the early 20th century, Korea generation officers in Colombia were convinced that they could reshape a rebellion-plagued rural society through the application of paternalistic theories onto the population, which would be grateful to their military benefactors for improving their living conditions, and would rehabilitate and renounce violence and reject the communist.³⁶ Informed through these assumptions, one could ask an obvious counterfactual question, could Civic Action have survived as a viable and sustainable strategic option for the Colmil given the contentious premises it was based on? More than its actual application, it was the vehement defence of its premises, which inevitably paved the way for what was to be a suicidal intervention of its proponents in politics. The fall of Ruiz Novoa marked the beginning of the concept's decline, a situation that was unavoidable due to the ideological rudiments on which it was based and the political environment in which it played out.

³³ Alberto Ruiz Novoa, 'Justicia Social', p.45.

³⁴ Valencia Tovar, 'Cómo conducir una campaña de Acción Cívico Militar,' p.900.

³⁵ Porch, 'The dangerous myths,' pp. 240, 251.

³⁶ Ibid.

Civic Action saw its foremost operationalization in the later stage of *Plan Lazo* during the campaign against the communist enclaves. During the initial phases, it was tied to the practice of psychological operations and public relations, delivering assistance especially through the Army's health dispensaries with free medical and dental treatments, free meals for children, and alphabetization campaigns. But eventually it also focused on establishing rapport with local authorities and peasants with some level of social and economic leverage Civic-Military Committees, which were presented as an instrument for coordinating development works by registering and prioritising the needs of communities.³⁷ Obviously these initial steps, whilst resembling the 'hand-outs' Valencia Tovar exhorted to avoid, at least served to boost the collection of tactical intelligence to be used against the *bandolero* groups, and corrode their bases of support. A more elaborate method to engage with the population appeared by 1963, with the expansion of Communal Action which was supported extensively by the US Peace Corps. As Michael Latham shows, in Colombia US volunteers attempted to mobilise the peasant population working with counterparts in the Colmil and other civilian state agencies at the most local level (*veredas*) to discuss problems with the people, suggest meetings and help organise *juntas comunales* (communal boards) to decide which projects of Civic Action were more urgent, i.e. roads, school, aqueducts and so forth.³⁸ According to ambassador Cabot Lodge, writes Latham, Communal Action could 'transform the *campesino* into a useful receptacle for material and technical inputs and fostered commitment to a new group identity.'³⁹

The problem for the 'Koreans' and their strategic outlook was that, in general terms, mainstream conservative politicians were especially sensitive about the military's new ideas regarding the relationship to the population. Indeed, the doctrine of the 'causes of violence,'

³⁷ Rempe, 'Guerrillas, bandits, and independent republics,' p.312.

³⁸ Latham, *Modernization as ideology*, p.128.

³⁹ Ibid.

which began to be disseminated across public opinion in mainstream newspapers and periodicals, became the target of attacks against the military command from conservative as well as other political sectors, even those that had initially supported the rehabilitation policy of Lleras Camargo. Many came to consider that the whole argument of dealing with the so called objective causes of the conflict vindicated the bandits and somewhat justified the political discourse of the emerging insurgent groups.⁴⁰ Still further, after their experience as victims of Rojas' military coup, Conservatives had reservations about the Colmil having a strong voice, a substantial level of political influence in a modernising mission. For many of them, Lleras Camargo had been, ironically, bending his own doctrine of civil- military relations by expanding the scope of the Colmil's role to incorporate state-building initiatives. In this respect, right wing political sectors argued that the Colmil's mission should be limited, or in other words, circumscribed to the classic understanding of 'public order.'⁴¹ But for other political sectors, especially Liberals and some pragmatic conservatives, who adhered to the priorities the Lleras Camargo Rehabilitation policy, curtailing the tactical preferences of Ruiz Novoa would mean a relapse to the chaos of the Laureano Gómez era.⁴²

President Guillermo Valencia tried to distance himself from the spirit of Lleras Camargo's rehabilitation, and adamantly defended a more limited view regarding the role of the military instrument that clearly favoured an enemy centric rather than a population centric one. However, the strong rehabilitation narrative of the previous administration, based on the

⁴⁰ As will be described in the following section, the most stringent political opposition to the ideas of the Colmil command came from the rightist wing of the Conservative party led by Álvaro Gómez, the son of former President Laureano Gomez. For this section of the Conservatives, Colombia simply had a law and order problem. Moreover, they argued the theory of the causes of violence legitimised the bandits. For extracts of the Conservative's speeches in Senate attacking Ruiz Novoa's ideas in English see: Henderson, *Modernization*, pp.402-403. A good synthesis of Colombian right wing ideas about the nature of the conflict, particularly limiting it to a law an order issue during the height of the conflict in the 1990s, can be found in: Porch, 'Autonomy in Conflict'.

⁴¹ 'Las palabras contra el General Ruiz', *El Tiempo*, 28 May 1964.

⁴² For example, newspaper *La Republica* in one of its editorial expressed: 'There are those who want the army to remain with folded arms, abandoning the peasants to their fate [...] Never before have seen such inversion of morality. The army has made itself worthy of public recognition.' See: 'Army vigilance praised,' *Bogota Radio Todelar Network in Spanish*, 26 September 1963. Accessed via: FBIS.

currency of modernisation theory and its strong promotion by the US via the Alliance for Progress, meant that the new administration of Valencia could not radically change the strategic course the Colmil had begun to take.⁴³ In other words, despite his opposition, it was during most of President Valencia's tenure that the Colmil attempted to implement the state-building mission, particularly through the set of non-violent tactics of Civic Action, Communal Action and Psychological Action. More specifically, General Ruiz Novoa confronted the criticisms of his strategic vision with a strong discourse that directed responsibility for the escalation of violence to the politicians. His main targets were particularly regional authorities, and obviously their patrons in congress, who complained that development initiatives and grass-roots organisation directed by Colmil officers undermined their influence.⁴⁴

Up to his retirement in 1965, General Ruiz Novoa was adamant in his view that violence was increasing due to partisanship rather than military inaction. 'We surely know that it was not the Armed Forces who told the peasantry to murder men, women and children in order to wipe out the very seed of their political adversaries, but rather it was the representatives and senators, the Colombian politicians,'⁴⁵ exclaimed the General during a Congressional session to which he was summoned to explain the 'political' nature of the Colmil's view's on the conflict. Less than five years after the transition from military rule, the War Minister's vision regarding the nature and dynamics of the conflict became a catalyst for an already heightened political debate around the role of the military that disturbed the civil-military accord of 1958 and increased mutual suspicions.

Civic Action in crisis - The Communist enclaves and the birth of FARC

⁴³ The diplomats in Bogota made it clear that: 'From the U.S point of view, dealing with Valencia is likely to be a very delicate and difficult task.' Quoted in: US Embassy to DoS, 'The Political Situation and the President-Elect', 26 June 1962, 720.561/12/462 Box 1544 RG59 1960-1963 NARA.

⁴⁴ See Ruiz Novoa's interview in: Leal, *El Oficio*, pp.81-82.

⁴⁵ John Henderson, *When Colombia Bled: A History of the Violence in Tolima*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), p.5.

By the end of 1963 the military implementation of *Plan Lazo* was at its height and had proved operationally successful in the combat against the bandits, and so, the thrust of the armed forces could be shifted towards the management of the communist groups. For conservative Guillermo Valencia these groups became the first priority in the pacification agenda. However, the new president, who was defined by US officials as an old school politician and ‘less satisfactory leader than his predecessor’ in the sense that he was ‘insufficiently sensitive to and knowledgeable about the government leadership needs of a modernising economy and society,’⁴⁶ was not a supporter of rehabilitation. Ironically, as discussed in the previous section, he had to oversee the extensive implementation of Civic Action campaigns, which with Alliance for Progress resources was being translated into projects of road building, and the construction of permanent infrastructure like electric power plants, schools and health-posts during the later stage of *Plan Lazo*.⁴⁷

But the pressure to confront the groups labelled as communist had already been voiced since late 1961. The reservations generated by the consolidation of enclaves (also referred to as communes) were not limited to the recalcitrant right wing political sectors. Members of both parties voiced concerns due to the heightened fears of the expansion of communism at the wake of the Cuban revolution, due to domestic political considerations.⁴⁸ However the Lleras Camargo administration had privileged the fight against banditry and the MOEC in its first two years of government, whilst attempting to conciliate the peasant leaders of the enclaves through the aid programmes of Rehabilitation. As the DoS put it: ‘The policy of President Lleras at the moment seems to avoid any resort to force, so far as possible, and to attempt a solution by

⁴⁶ US Embassy to DoS, 14 May 1964, RG59 NND959000, NARA.

⁴⁷ ‘Eliminación del bandolero en potencia,’ *El Tiempo*, 31 May 1964.

⁴⁸ Diverse patronage agendas at the local level, for example, explain the debate the enclaves generated for sectors of the Liberal party. Given that most of the enclaves were composed by leftist splinter groups of that party, the so called ‘sucios’ or ‘comuneros’, as described in Chapter 3, led many in the party to consider that continued efforts in Rehabilitation were legitimising them. For an explanation of the divisions in the Liberal party and the communes refer to: Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, pp.40-52.

finding unoccupied land that can be parcelled out to the needy refugees and peasants with a minimum of unpleasantness on the part of the owners.’⁴⁹

In fact, DoS officials were aware of the situation with the communist enclaves since the late 1950s and amidst the distress caused by Fidel Castro’s triumph, attempted to describe to high official in Washington the nature of these groups and the areas they controlled. For example, Albert Geberich, the Officer-in-Charge of Colombian Affairs, emphasised that many of the enclaves could trace their origins to 1936, when the Liberal administration of Alfonso Lopez passed a land reform bill which led many peasants to colonise unoccupied land. Chapter 3 described how these groups became radicalised, during the height of *La Violencia*, as result of the efforts of the Gomez and Rojas regimes to prevent their expansion to other land or in their efforts to reinstate the territory to its previous owners. In this sense, of particular concern for the US were the enclaves of the Sumapaz region, which had been the focus of the military effort during the late 1950s which had survived and grown. According to Geberich, ‘gradually these communities developed into a sort of socialist state and Communists settled among them and gradually came to hold a position of dominant influence.’⁵⁰ In the final stages of the Rojas dictatorship, some of the groups in the Sumapaz region responded to the government’s offensive by forming peasant columns, evacuating the areas and installing themselves in the fringes of the Tolima department, deep in the isolated parts of the central Andes.⁵¹ As Eduardo Pizarro explains, in these areas the leftist peasants began rebuilding their organisations under the sway of the Communist party and maintained a ‘self-defence’ stance by avoiding open confrontation, and acquiesced to the appeasement approach of Lleras Camargo provided that the threat of use of force was not manifested.⁵²

⁴⁹ ‘Communist "Enclaves" in Colombia’, Confidential, Memorandum, 18 May 1959. Accessed via: DNSA.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Pizarro, ‘Revolutionary Guerrilla Groups’, pp.180-181.

⁵² Ibid.

However, many Colombian Conservatives regarded these groups as implacable enemies that had intensified the war against the Gomez regime, and so felt they had benefited from Lleras Camargo's Rehabilitation agenda to regroup and colonize new land. For Alvaro Gomez Hurtado, the former Conservative President's son, who led the right wing of the party in Senate, the Communist self-defence forces had been able to establish 'Independent Republics' due to the government's ill-conceived Rehabilitation policy. 'National sovereignty is collapsing like a handkerchief,' exclaimed Gomez Hurtado in a Senate plenary, 'there is a group of independent republics that do not recognize the sovereignty of the Colombian state, where the Colombian army cannot enter, where people say the army's presence is frightening abomination.'⁵³ Historian James Henderson writes that that speech of Gomez Hurtado's was timely in that it came two days before Castro openly embraced Marxism-Leninism and two weeks before President Kennedy visited Bogotá, and so it resonated, in that it augmented pressure on the government to revise its general policy towards these groups. But as Henderson also explains, by the time of Gomez Hurtado's speech, two well defined schools of thought existed concerning the enclaves, with different views in terms of the danger they posed to the government and how to handle them. On the one hand, there were those that considered the danger they presented was limited; that if they had embraced communism it was out of ignorance or the sheer harshness of the war against Gomez and Rojas and the grave socio economic situation the conflict had generated. Hence, if Rehabilitation had followed its path and the country's situation had improved, these groups would eventually return to the government's side.⁵⁴ In those terms, what the government and society should do was improve its efforts to reduce partisanship, close the open wounds of *La Violencia*, in particular solving land tenure issues, and keep the resources flowing to improve the life standards of the peasants

⁵³ Quoted in: Henderson, *Modernization*, pp.402-403.

⁵⁴ Valencia Tovar makes a similar argument to Henderson. See for example his comments on the final days of the Lleras Camargo administration in his book "The President I met": Valencia, *Los Presidentes*, pp.253-256.

via development initiatives. The other school of thought was in line with the growing anti-communism of the Cold War and the fear of Castro, and so framed the enclaves as ‘a contagious disease that unless vigorously combated would spread through society.’⁵⁵ As expected, both points of view were also present within the Colmil’s officer corps and demarcated, more or less, the frontiers between the Koreans and Traditionalists approach to the problem.⁵⁶

According to records of the DoS, the first undertaking of the Colmil in a communist enclave, was a Civic Action program in October 1962 in the Sumapaz region. This was described as a short ‘impact project’ that lasted over a week, with the objective of analysing the reception of the Colmil by the local peasantry. The programme was composed of a small military team of doctors, dentists and veterinarians who moved in by horseback escorted by a company of *Lanceros* who hauled provisions and relief supplies.⁵⁷ Embassy officials explained that given the proximity to Bogotá, and the fact that the armed resistance in the area had already been ‘softened’ after the armed campaign there in 1957, positive results could be expected with minor effort to encourage similar actions in more hostile regions.⁵⁸ What can be inferred from this first step is that not only were the Colmil attempting to obtain local political will to expand the Civic Actions elsewhere, but it was also for the consumption of US authorities in order to secure resources to expand its activity. It was actually in the interest of the embassy to promote the possibility of obtaining visible results from these actions to secure resources from Washington for the financing of Colombia’s Internal Defense Plan. For example, by January 1963, in an ‘urgent action telegram,’ the embassy was concerned that US authorities in Washington were delaying the procurement of engineering and medical supplies directed to

⁵⁵ Henderson, *Modernization*, p.403.

⁵⁶ For the growth of conflicting views within the Colmil vis-à-vis the enclaves see: Leal, *El Oficio*, pp.85-86.

⁵⁷ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Civic Action in Sumapaz,’ 12 October 1962, RG59 1960-63, 721.OOW/8-560 Box 1545, NARA.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

impact programs to be developed in 'isolated and violence ridden areas.'⁵⁹ 'From stand-point of efficient realization of IDP', the telegram continued, 'Embassy believes rapid realization of these programs is essential. This all more true when Colombian Armed Forces view on Civic Action taken into account.'⁶⁰ According to US diplomats, the programs developed by the Colmil in Sumapaz had demonstrated amply that the 'breakdown of isolation and reestablishment of official services is one of the most effective ways to combat violence.'⁶¹ The commitment of the US government to the development of Civic Action in the enclaves was certainly substantial, and augmented the power and influence of Ruiz Novoa's strategic outlook. As Porch points out, 40 per cent of the US\$40 million dollars that Washington gave to Colombia between 1962 and 1966 in military assistance went to Civic Action.⁶²

All these points reinforced the 'Korean' belief that the danger of communist subversion and stabilising the regions affected by violence could be achieved by grievance management. For Valencia Tovar, the fact that eventually in the Sumapaz area inhabitants were offered the possibility to become small holders allowed them to 'integrate to the national community without the need of resorting to brutal measures.'⁶³ In short, this appeared to show that a good combination of clemency with firmness could yield positive results in the long run. But perhaps, drawing a parallel with Porch's reading of the campaign of General Lazare Hoche against during the French Revolution, the light touch approach of Valencia Tovar only succeeded precisely because of, not in contrast, to the brutal measures tried by his predecessors.⁶⁴ The scorched earth tactics employed by the Rojas and Gomez regimes during

⁵⁹ US Embassy to DoS, 16 January 1963, RG 59, 721.001/14-1860, Box 1547, NARA.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Douglas Porch, 'Autonomy in Conflict,' p. 128.

⁶³ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.424.

⁶⁴ According to Porch, General Lazare Hoche 'supposedly pioneered the light touch technique of small wars'. Charles Calwell commented about his approach: 'he achieved success as much by his happy combination of clemency with firmness, as by his masterly dispositions in the theatre of war.' See: Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.5

the 1950s, were not necessary anymore in the early 1960s when the campaign had reduced the armed resistance in the Sumapaz to a handful of holdouts and the main communist elements of had moved out of the region to neighbouring departments. Although, it is fair to say, that the narrative of the ‘Koreans’ did not suggest dismissing the use of force. On the contrary, as Valencia Tovar emphasised, it had to be ‘intelligently measures and applied,’ particularly to compel the most radicalised leaders of the enclaves, and to assure the protection of the peasants from possible reprisals for supporting the Colmil.⁶⁵ Valencia Tovar developed this point further in his memoirs as follows:

With Plan Lazo it became clear that Civic Action and its immediate subordinate Psychological Action did not exclude the employment of force. The latter was indispensable to restore order or stop outlaws with no possibility of redemption whatsoever. Civic Action rationalised force, removing the central character it had played in past times, and reduced to the minimum required to fulfil the military’s mission.⁶⁶

But pressure to take definite military action against the enclaves increased during the second year of Guillermo Valencia’s administration, who had been pressured by his political allies to respond to the consolidation of two other enclaves in the Tolima department: Marquetalia and El Pato. The military offensive against the enclave of Marquetalia, which contained several thousand *campesinos* commanded by Manuel Marulanda Velez better known by his *nom de guerre* ‘Tirofijo’ began in May 1964.⁶⁷ Code named *Operacion Soberanía* (Operation Sovereignty), it consisted of no less than 1,500 men distributed in three infantry battalions, and the support of the highly mobile counter-insurgency special units.⁶⁸ *Soberanía* failed in its prime objective, the killing or capture of ‘Tirofijo.’⁶⁹ He and his guerrillas, calculated at strength of no more than 50, eluded the offensive and retreated towards the south where they

⁶⁵ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.423.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Us Embassy to DoS, ‘Army initiation of Marquetalia military operations’ 22 May 1964, RG59 NND959000, NARA. For more details on the social and political characterisation of Marquetalia see Henderson, *When Colombia bled*, p.222.

⁶⁸ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, pp.471-472.

⁶⁹ ‘Bandit’s Headquarters Burned in Marquetalia’, *Bogotá Radio Horizonte Network*, 16 June 1964. Accessed via FBIS.

rendezvoused with communists of El Pato, which in the spring of 1965 fell to an almost identical operation.⁷⁰ ‘Tirofijo’ was able to escape once again, leaving his mountain hide-outs behind, and in the Colombian equivalent of ‘Mao’s Long March’ moved towards the south of the country towards the indomitable jungle fringe where he founded with surviving guerrillas and communist supporters, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - FARC. Hence, the only effect of the military effort was the removal of the physical communist enclave from Tolima, a ‘success’ that only proved to be temporary as eventually the FARC’s mobile columns, would return to harass region after 1966.⁷¹

However, the immediate effect of *Operacion Soberanía*, increased the popularity of the Colmil. Violence had been reducing due to the elimination of the bandit gangs, whilst the move against Marquetalia, generated a sense of security in the central cordillera not experienced since the 1930s. Particularly benefiting of the improved security was the department Tolima, which had seen the blunt of the confrontation and had suffered in a period of less than three years, between 1957 and 1960, more than 16,000 death, 40,000 pieces of land abandoned and at least 34,000 houses burned; a devastating picture for a never declared war, wrote Henderson.⁷² In this context, the acclaim and political profile of General Ruiz Novoa increased. He was pressing for a major surge in the application of Civic Action in the ‘liberated’ enclaves to consolidate the military results and incorporate them to the nation. Violence was being contained not solved he argued. According to a US embassy report, the Minister of War demanded a massive amount of funds to the government to underwrite the whole operation with social and economic programmes, which in the opinion of the diplomats would generate

⁷⁰ ‘Combined Armed Forces Occupy El Pato Area’, *Bogotá Radio Cadena Nacional in Spanish*, 23 March 1965. Accessed via FBIS.

⁷¹ Pizarro comments for example that Marquetalia was: ‘a truly pyrrhic military victory with tremendous implications. The use of thousands of soldiers to dislodge a few hundred of peasants resulted in a situation, twenty years later, in which the FARC had a network of twenty seven armed fronts.’ Quoted in Pizarro, ‘Revolutionary Groups’, p.181.

⁷² Henderson, *When Colombia bled*, pp.223-224.

domestic political tensions over allocation of resources and strain the national budget.⁷³ For the US the availability of sums in the dimension requested by Ruiz for Civic Action were questionable, and would not surely be provided by the government, pointing that ‘his tendency to try to poach on the financial reserves of other Ministries’ was a deep source of conflict.⁷⁴ Why would the politicians concern themselves in prioritizing public resources for an isolated area with a low population density, when they had to focus on assuring public spending for a growing urban population where votes were, and still are, materialised?⁷⁵

Civic Action was not only criticised because of financial matters. The greatest risk for its continuity was the fear of intervention of the army in the political arena. Given his increased popularity, General Ruiz Novoa was invited to speak continuously in public gatherings to present the conduct of the Colmil. In his speeches he espoused the ideas he had developed at the outset of the decade as Army CoS, and so demanded ‘social justice’ as the national purpose and defined unrest and insurgency as products of underdevelopment and government neglect. The concept of Civic Action, he noted, was the single most important element to successfully curb rural violence, and if expanded and prioritised by the government could help alter the country’s socio-economic structures. But the problem was that the General’s speeches, according to US diplomats, ‘closely resembled politicking.’⁷⁶ According to US diplomats, this was a view that was also shared by many politicians, and the press, who accused him of advocating populist ideas that resembled those of General Rojas Pinilla.⁷⁷ After a widely

⁷³ US. Embassy to DOS, ‘Progress report of Colombia’s internal Defense Plan’ 24 July 1964, RG59 NND959000, NARA.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ As a Congressman stated at the time: ‘The nation is facing a serious financial situation and it cannot afford the luxury of spending 25 percent of its total budget on the armed forces [...] We hope that Gen Alberto Ruiz Novoa does not make himself the center of parliamentary discussions, a posture, a posture that does not become him as a minister or general.’ See: ‘Nation Cannot Afford Armed Forces Budget’, Bogotá Radio Cadena Nacional, 10 September 1964. Accessed via: FBIS.

⁷⁶ US Embassy to DoS, ‘Ruiz –Valencia Exchange highlight problem of military intervention’ 12 June 1964, RG59, NND959000, NARA.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

publicised speech of Ruiz Novoa at a banquet offered by the Colombian Society of Agriculture to the Colmil, to celebrate the fall of the Marquetalia enclave in the spring of 1964, the General was confronted by a Conservative senator who demanded him that if he wanted to enter politics he should take off his uniform first.⁷⁸ That phrase more or less summarised the general apprehension of the civilian elites to the ideas he was developing. Indeed, other politicians were more recalcitrant and moved against the whole value-system of the 'Koreans'. As stated by Senator Caicedo Ayerbe, who happened to be the cousin of the Army CoS Ayerbe Chaux, and who had a tense relationship with Ruiz Novoa and would eventually conspire against him:

Personally I believe after the banquet at Tequendama a very dangerous sociological typology appeared, in which violence is not only explained in economic terms but also in moral ones. All of these began with the celebrated books and reports on the subject [the commission for the study of violence of Lleras Camargo] and developed in lamentable reports of the army. This theory of bandits as heroes and victims leads to the moral impossibility of repressing violence. It also contradicts the whole effort of the nation and the army to recover its unity.⁷⁹

To all those criticisms, Ruiz Novoa answered that the non-deliberative spirit of the Lleras Doctrine could not turn Colombian soldiers into second class citizens. He was actually at the time even defended by president Valencia against the attacks of his own party congressmen. 'The General has not deliberated. He has opined, and in this country there is freedom of opinion,' asserted the president.⁸⁰ However, Ruiz Novoa rapidly turned into a political liability for the government, and opposition to his demands and style grew daily from representatives of both parties who grew weary for two main reasons. First, because Civic Action lost face due to the increased violence of the guerrillas of 'Tirofijo', whose mobile *cuadrillas* began creating havoc, and hence demanded a more assertive response from the Colmil. There was no option for 'hearts and minds'. Second, as local politicians kept arguing that an expansion of the Colmil state-building mission via that tactic reduced their political influence. As former liberal President Eduardo Santos summarised in an op-ed in *El Tiempo* daily:

⁷⁸ 'Las palabras contra el General Ruiz', *El Tiempo*, 28 May 1964.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.414.

⁸⁰ 'Ruiz no ha renunciado y no creo que lo haga, dice Valencia,' *El Tiempo*, 30 May 1964.

‘Sending missionaries to evangelise the heartless *bandoleros* and offering them money so they abandon their evil ways, and prefer the honest and rough duty of working, dispensing from the simple task of robbing and pillaging, is in my view optimistic as it is dangerous [...] General Ruiz Novoa, with demagogic attempts espoused the theory that to domesticate the bandits they should be lured to civic-military traps. The result is there at hand; *Tiro-Fijo* completely defiant. With *bandolerismo* now rethreaded with communism, there is no other recourse than force without contemplation.’⁸¹

Finally, the opposition to Ruiz Novoa also became acute in sectors of the Colmil General Staff. In particular the Chief of the Armed Forces General Reveiz Pizarro and the Army CoS Ayerbe Chaux convinced the President that their superior had political ambitions, which paved the way for his dismissal in January 1965. As Porch explains, with the firing of Ruiz Novoa, President Valencia reorganised his Ministry of War into a Ministry of Defence in December 1965 and a *Consejo Superior de Defensa Nacional* (High Council for National Defence) was created as a vehicle for the military to express their views independent of the highest ranking Colmil officer.⁸² President Valencia sided with Ruiz Novoa’s former Chiefs of Staff, and moved to demote Civic Action’s strategic importance and to shift the Colmil’s focus to the military suppression of the insurgents. At face value, the reasoning of many of Ruiz Novoa’s subordinates to oppose Civic Action as the decisive means to wage counter-insurgency, was based on safeguarding the military’s interests by not taking major political risks. But a core issue is that they considered Civic Action as military malpractice, as it deviated the Colmil from its true mission and was ‘converting it into a welfare agency’.⁸³ Giving emphasis to this ‘secondary’ task, as it was actually stated in US Army doctrine, was simply not possible as it converted the Colmil into a social welfare agency. The Chief of the Armed Forces, General Reveiz – second in line after Ruiz Novoa, was convinced that such a politicised role for the Colmil would, in the long run, play badly for their institutional interests. He realised that they

⁸¹ ‘Danza de las horas,’ *El Tiempo*, 4 April 1965.

⁸² Porch, ‘Autonomy in Conflict,’ p.129.

⁸³ Leal, *El Oficio*, p.82.

would be unable to accomplish the mission set by Ruiz Novoa, and that the public display and unfulfillment of promises would politically backfire.⁸⁴

But for Ruiz Novoa, concentrating solely on the use of force was a throwback to *La Violencia*'s tactics, only comparable to 'chasing a fly with a steamroller instead of a fly swatter.'⁸⁵ After his retirement he emphasised that battlefield success against the guerrillas would not be the end of violence. It was the absence of strong institutions of civil society, and a growing apathy towards the National Front political system, that restricted participation in the political process to only two parties, which he saw as the source of growing dissent and a petri dish for the advance of communism.⁸⁶ The General's analysis proved to be correct to a great extent, as with a more militant guidance from the Communist party, the fundamental objections of the new insurgent groups to Colombia's political order, were to be intensified with the advance of the National Front agreement into its third consecutive term of controlled democracy. By the 1970s, the National Front was denounced as an 'oligarchic compromise' that reproduced a system of political immobility which made it impossible to effect the economic and social reform of Colombian rural society short of revolution.⁸⁷

By 1966, the end of *bandolerismo* and the tactical successes against the communist enclaves, the premises of the 'causes of violence' rhetoric began to crumble, both for Colombian policy makers as well as for their US counterparts. Civic Action began to lose its political basis as the main strategic concept for the Colmil. 'The very elimination of criminal or communist anti-social elements appears to have produced a certain rehabilitative effect per se, and it cannot be demonstrated with certainty that all areas with miserable economic and

⁸⁴ An account of General Reveiz reaction to Ruiz Novoa's departure and his 'institutional worries' produced by the latter's political views can be found in: Torres del Rio, *Fuerzas Armadas*, pp.145-146.

⁸⁵ US. Embassy to DoS, 23 September, 1966, RG59 NND95900, NARA.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ The origin of the M-19 guerrilla, created by young urban cadres of the FARC that made the turn towards *foquismo*, is found in 1972 and its opposition to the continuation of the National Front and the restriction the Colombian political system placed on third parties. See: Pizarro, 'Revolutionary Groups', pp.182-183.

social conditions are necessarily violence prone' concluded a report by the US military mission.⁸⁸ Such conclusions came in a period when the Alliance for Progress began to fall into an 'ideological vacuum,' as Hal Brands suggests.⁸⁹ Given that the high hopes for rapid development it had created under modernisation theory, the initiative soon produced disappointment in Washington.⁹⁰

However, Richard Maullin argued in his 1971 Rand report that Civic Action continued the prime aspect of counter-insurgency operations for the Colmil, pointing to the fact that field-grade officers who supported the concept eventually were to rise to high positions. He cited the case of Colonel Valencia Tovar who in September 1966 assumed command of the Army's 5th Brigade, in charge of the eastern frontier of the country with Venezuela, and which under his command had to deal with the rise of the Castroist influenced ELN. Against the ELN Valencia Tovar continued to stress the need for a military approach that dealt firmly with improving the living conditions of the rural population following his population centric approach to counter-insurgency.⁹¹ In 1968 the Army CoS General Guillermo Pinzon attempted to revive the state-building elements of Plan Lazo, proposing a short lived spin off named *Plan Andes* to attack the ELN. The plan called again for the classical three stage operational sequence of isolation – destruction and consolidation of counter-insurgency theory. However, the government of Carlos Lleras Restrepo decided not to support his Army CoS, and eventually dismissed General Pinzon in 1969 for his criticisms to the government's decision to reduce the military budget.⁹² The denouement of Valencia Tovar's professional drama, however, escaped Maullin's timeline. By 1973 he was promoted to General and soon named Army CoS, following in the steps of his mentor Ruiz Novoa, achieving a degree of public display with bold statements that

⁸⁸ US. Embassy to DoS, 23 September 1966, RG59 NND95900, NARA.

⁸⁹ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*, p. 93.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Maullin, *Soldiers*, p.78.

⁹² Leal, *El Oficio*, p.93.

angered the politicians which eventually drew him into political disagreements with President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen in 1974, who did not hesitate in dismissing him.⁹³

Like Valencia Tovar, other staff officers of the ‘Korea generation,’ proponents of the state-building and development mission also remained in active service after Ruiz Novoa’s dismissal, and were promoted to the upper ranks from which they continued to argue that the Colmil should be a part of the economic development of the nation to deal with the economic and social roots of the insurgency. They all followed their predecessor’s footsteps, dismissed by governments that would not tolerate them arguing that the military was isolated in its mission and not been offered the required tools for pacifying the country.

Conclusion: Counter-insurgency as an end in itself

By the turn of 1960s, it can be concluded that the practice of counter-insurgency became an end in itself for the Colmil. The overemphasis on technical and operational factors of the conduct of counter-insurgency led to increased disputes within the Colmil leadership about how it should adjust to a given understanding to the nature of the conflict, and over the adequate choice and sequencing of its methods. Counter-insurgency in the long run became a rigid approach for the Colmil that pre-ordained the application of the repository of techniques and procedures collected in *Plan Lazo*.

For example, when Civic Action began to lose its primacy after the dismissal of Ruiz Novoa, the view championed by his critics of the ‘Traditionalist’ school emphasised the need to move away from state-building and improve the instruments for the application of force that were being developed in parallel. In this sense, a widespread idea in Colmil thinking consolidated after the fall of the Marquetalia enclave was that ‘only well-led small units are

⁹³ These events are explained in Chapter 1. See in particular footnote number 84 in that chapter.

successful in irregular war.’⁹⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Villamarin, the historian of *Operacion Anori*, in which the ELN was defeated in the battlefield in 1973, according to the Colmil official account, considers that the experience was paradigmatic, in the sense that it incorporated the major lessons of counter-insurgency planning developed in the early 1960s. ‘Contrary to regular warfare, in counter-guerrilla operations it is the addition of small events that make a difference; they impact the morale of the enemy.’⁹⁵ The author goes on to explain that this was why ‘Anori could not be conceived as a pre-planned detailed strategy [...] in this sense tactical flexibility allowed a permanent action against the objective.’⁹⁶ In other words, the imagination, constancy and prowess of officers is what counted in the long run in conducting effective counter-insurgency. For many officers in the Colmil, particularly those who ascribed to the ‘Traditionalist’ school of thought, this led to the belief that operational proficiency in counter-insurgency, applying tactical responses considered to be correct, could translate into strategic results.⁹⁷

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the Colmil’s practice of counter-insurgency during the mid-1960s is that it also underlined the breach between the Colmil and its civilian masters, particularly as politicians were accused of not offering sufficient political will or resources to accomplish an optimal counter-insurgency campaign. The main influence of this civilian-military divide is that it offered a degree of inner consistency to the different strands of Colmil thought throughout the escalation of the conflict since the mid-1970s, as described in Chapter 1. The following concluding chapter will draw together the main findings of this thesis, which includes addressing the consequences for strategic formulation in Colombia of

⁹⁴ Villamarin, *Condor en el aire*, p.214.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.324.

the interaction of this civil-military tension with the other central components that form the Colmil's value system.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this thesis has been to dissect the central features that configure the Colombian military's (Colmil) strategic tradition and to understand the origins of their approach to counter-insurgency. It has argued that the Colmil's experience with counter-insurgency during the 1960s left a deep legacy in its thinking that offers insight into their present behaviour. With reference to elements of strategic theory, the thesis attempted to analyse the military's judgements on the character of the conflict, the use and limits of force, and the political control of the armed instrument. One of the main conclusions reached in this analysis is that Colmil thinking is characterised by its oscillatory nature, influenced by the interaction of two identifiable schools of thought. The interaction of these schools of thought has been conducive to an absence of strategic consensus over the ends to be sought, and by a lack of precision about how the means required to attain them would be employed.

To construct the Colmil's strategic tradition, the thesis began by placing their most recent counter-insurgency effort in historical perspective. Looking beyond the technical aspects of the Colombians' publicised operational success during the Presidencies of Álvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos in dealing with their historic insurgency threats, Chapter 1 identified thematic lines of continuity and change in their behaviour since the turn of the 1990s, and their longer five-decade old engagement with counter-insurgency. The identification of the distinct motivational patterns and assumptions in Colmil strategic thinking was continued in Chapter 2 which examined the themes that have historically influenced their evolution. The themes outlined included the antecedents to the problem of military autonomy in the country; the competing views about the causes of the Colombian conflict; the depiction of the Colmil not only as a protector of the nation but also as its creator via colonisation; as well as the political effects of a long-standing military relationship with the United States.

The evidence presented in the first two chapters demonstrates that the debates leading to the configuration of two distinct schools in the Colmil have remained mostly unchanged since the inception of counter-insurgency thinking in the country. Various reasons explain the permanence of such debates in Colmil thought. Firstly, the ideas of those senior officers who originally promoted different approaches to counter-insurgency played a definite influence on their subordinates, who in turn reached commanding positions after the late 1990s. Additionally, several of the debates that had been promoted by the most vocal veteran senior officers would, in some cases, be intensified after their forced retirement at different stages of the conflict. Finally, the majority of these veteran officers became the public voices of a military establishment wary of the consequences of trespassing the thin line established in the non-deliberation clause of the 'Lleras Doctrine' civil-military accord.

The first two chapters of the thesis also identified various intertwined strategic debates that have remained constant in the military's mind since the beginning of the conflict in the late 1940s. First, the fundamental disagreement about the causes of the conflict has led to different interpretations of the character and motivations of the insurgencies that have grown on the territory. These discussions about the nature of the conflict and the motivations of their adversaries evidenced a lack of a common understanding as to how the conflict should be dealt with, in particular in the absence of agreement over the limits of force. Should the Colmil seek to achieve a crushing victory over the insurgent groups or, instead, use force as a bargaining instrument? This lack of clarity over the political ends sought, combined with an ingrained distrust about the intentions of the insurgency increased military discontent with the government's reliance on open-ended negotiations with the enemy, from the 1980s up to today. Finally, these debates also demonstrate the existence of long-running common ideas over the political conduct of the conflict that intensified a convoluted civil-military dialogue.

Whilst there has been an enduring debate over the underlying causes of the conflict, there is at least agreement over its starting date which is traced to the national revolt that resulted from the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán on the 9th of April 1948. With this in mind, the analysis of the progression of the Colmil's strategic tradition began with an examination of their participation in *La Violencia* during the 1950s. The arrival to the presidency of Laureano Gómez in August 1950 marked an intensification of hostilities between the Conservative government and Liberal rebel guerrillas that confused the Colmil's traditional outlook on internal public order missions. Whilst the administration kept defining the role of the Colmil in terms of public order maintenance, to avoid giving belligerent status to the rebels and reduce the nominal character of their threat by criminalising them, *La Violencia* began to be understood by a section of the Colmil as a state of war. The purpose of the armed instrument was hence defined by the ultra-partisan administration and its military chiefs as defeating the guerrillas in battle.

The reaction by many field and especially company grade officers to the military policy of the government of Laureano Gomez served as a basis for a review of the Colmil's role in the conflict that would favour the adoption of counter-insurgency thinking in the next decade. In this sense, Chapter 3 evidenced how the Colmil's participation in the Korean War and the rapprochement of many of the younger officers with the US was a determining influence for a reappraisal of the internal roles and missions of the military. In particular, they judged that the Colombian conflict was not comparable to an actual war like the one they had experienced in Korea. But the reaction to the administration's conduct of *La Violencia* was also influenced by other factors. For example, given the lengthy and mixed experience in dealing with the Liberal guerrillas, many of the officers became aware of the harsh realities of rural life, thus laying a foundation for the future debate within the Colmil as to the nature of the conflict and the limits of force. As a consequence, there was also a growing notion that many Colmil's commanders'

tolerance of brutal action against the population in areas where the political opposition to Gomez had ascendancy, was a self-defeating move that had served only to escalate violence. In this respect, the foundational changes in the Colmil mind were reaffirmed following the experience of General Rojas Pinilla's military regime between 1953 and 1957. As evidenced in the Chapter, in its early days the military regime, reasoning that *La Violencia* had mainly a socio-economic origin, set the tone for the promotion of a state-building narrative as the core strategic course of action for the Colmil. Putting an end to the conflict by improving the living conditions of the population presented itself as a basic requirement. These tensions, arising with the Colmil during *La Violencia*, marked the beginning of the transition to counter-insurgency that gathered momentum during the 1960s.

A central argument in Chapter 4 was that the rationalist features of counter-insurgency theory became explicit in Colmil thinking in the early 1960s. The theory consolidated a conviction that if its norms were correctly followed, counter-insurgency would be an effective formula to fight what they judged was a separate category of conflict defined as 'irregular war' that manifested itself in Colombia. This view grew as a result of the effectiveness of the military in combatting the rebel groups that survived from *La Violencia* during the 1950s and various operational successes against the first Communist-influenced insurgency groups that appeared in the territory. Likewise, the strong promotion by the US of counter-insurgency thinking and the extensive material assistance offered to the Colmil underpinned the standing of the theory within the ranks. But whilst considering themselves proficient enough to face the operational challenges of 'irregular war' by adopting the techniques of counter-insurgency, Colmil officers close to the 'Traditionalist' school faulted the civilian administration for the political conduct of the conflict. They argued that politicians calculated that insurgent attacks were a tactical nuisance that did not seriously challenge the political order, and that therefore they did not offer enough political will for the Colmil to fulfil the ultimate goal of defeating the insurgency.

In the long run, this civil-military divide resulted in the divorce of the strategic dimension of counter-insurgency from the operational level, with no coordinated political approach to frame an effective state response.

Essentially, what this thesis reveals is that from the mid-1960s, soldiers have been left alone with the techniques of counter-insurgency to deal with problems rooted in political conditions. As a result, the response of the Colmil either took the form of proliferating Special Forces and intelligence collection mechanism, or consisted of the regurgitation of the Civic Action model championed by the narrative of modernisation, with no definition of clear political ends. If there was a perceptible political objective for the Colmil in the conflict against the Communist-inspired insurgencies from the mid-1960s up to the year 2002, it was to contain the insurgency rather than to devise a long-term strategic solution. Military action, in short, was left on its own to produce operational results. For this lack of strategic formulation Colombians paid a high a price, as by the late 1980s the state had found itself almost completely overmatched by the twin explosions of drug mafias led by Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel on the one hand, which had declared an open war against it, and guerrilla organisations, in particular the FARC, with a nationwide presence and delineated strategies for the seizure of power.

On the other hand, in Colombian military thought and practice, the standing of state-building via Civic Action, which in the 21st century is referred to as *Acción Integral* in Colmil doctrine,¹ has varied in response to the political context. The thesis has analysed how the concept of state-building became a distinguishing source of tension in the attempt to formulate strategy. After its decline in the second half of the 1960s, the standing of state-building in

¹ *Acción Integral* is referred to in current doctrine as 'non-armed actions (not lethal-not kinetical) that are a fundamental part of the national strategy to neutralise the terrorist threat.' See: Ministerio de Defensa Nacional – Comando General Fuerzas Militares, *FF.MM 3-104 Manual de Acción Integral* (Bogotá: Imprenta Fuerzas Militares, 2012).

Colmil thought rose again since the 1980s. This is in part due to the vocal opposition of the then Minister of Defence, General Fernando Landazábal to the initiation of peace talks with the M-19 and the FARC by the Belisario Betancur administration and the proposal of a blanket amnesty for the guerrillas. As US intelligence sources put it:

The Armed Force's approach to countering the insurgent movements, particularly under Landazabal, involves going after the roots of the problem. In this sense, civic action programs are receiving increased emphasis under his leadership. He argues that any amnesty program not taking into account the underlying factors of poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity will never eliminate violence in Colombia. Thus, the military's price for accepting amnesty agreements will probably include a demand for increased resources for civic action programs, especially engineer-related activities.²

The question of military state-building in the country's peripheral areas restarted during the late 1990s with the US sponsored *Plan Colombia*. One of the components of this counter-narcotics programme was to promote initiatives of economic development for peasants as part of the eradication and substitution of coca crops. Finally, the concept played an important role in the configuration of Alvaro Uribe's Policy of Territorial Consolidation. In this context, officers close to the line of thought of the 'Korean' school have seen these efforts as central elements of counter-insurgency, as they attempt to solve what are considered to be unattended social grievances that exist in the most volatile rural and jungle areas, and which are being exploited by the FARC.

However, as detailed in Chapter 4, the Colmil's adoption of the state-building and grievance management mission since the 1960s, more than just a breaking point in its efforts at strategic formulation, also responded to the immediate political requirements and calculations of both the John F. Kennedy and Lleras Camargo's administrations. Following modernisation theory, they considered that national development policy efforts could use a helping hand from the Army in non-military roles. A well-executed development initiative, it was assumed, would serve to contain internal unrest and the advance of Communist insurgency.

² Defense Intelligence Agency, 'Colombia: The Army and Amnesty' Secret, Intelligence Appraisal, December 29, 1982. Accessed via: DNSA.

However, by the mid-1960s the political conditions which gave Civic Action its strategic importance changed. A boost in economic and social development was no longer considered the main means to avoid the expansion of Communist-inspired insurgency. On the contrary, if the security apparatus of the state could contain the threat, that seemed enough. As Chapter 5 demonstrated, no matter if the ‘Korean school’ still considered state-building to be the ultimate strategic solution to deal with the roots of the Colombian conflict, US assistance withered and the government was not willing to finance such an endeavour. Moreover, the fears that Cuba would systematically export its revolution to the South American continent proved exaggerated and led to a revision of US policy goals.³

The key point made in this analysis is that the frustrations of the officers that formulated the state-building mission of Colmil left an important legacy. ‘Colombia is a nation of singular things: civilians give war and the military peace’⁴, attested Valencia Tovar in his memoirs whilst remembering the political upheaval the concept of Civic Action produced in the mid-1960s. In his view politicians – and citizens alike – have not come to understand that ‘the application of force does not exclude the humanitarian and comprehensive treatment of a situation like that which configures Colombian violence,’⁵ which in his mind would explain why there has been no definite solution to what seemed to be an endemic problem in the country that could only be solved via a ‘comprehensive approach’, to use a contemporary term. As this thesis has argued throughout, a consequence of this mentality evolved more or less into a stab-in-the back notion as a guiding theme of civil-military relations. This phenomenon, explains historian Douglas Porch, is common when politicians engage in state-building endeavours with

³ ‘Given the declining state of the Cuban economy, Soviet disagreement with fomenting armed revolution in Latin America (at least for the moment), it appears unlikely that external support for the guerrillas will increase in the short run. Political and economy appear reasonably secure during the time frame of this CASP’, explained the US embassy in Bogota in their country analysis for the period 1968-1973. See: ‘Country Analysis and Strategy Paper – Colombia’ April 1968, Pol –Col US Box 1992 NARA.

⁴ Valencia Tovar, *Testimonio*, p.420.

⁵ Ibid.

a counter-insurgency dimension, as by winning or losing, the military normally ends up feeling betrayed by the civilians.⁶

Impact and further research

This research has been motivated by the changes in the Colombian conflict that became palpable at the end of 2011, when the offensive initiated by Alvaro Uribe in 2002 succeeded in substantially reducing the threat posed by the FARC insurgency to the stability of the country. In the past few years Colombia has been again in the international spotlight, but not because of the negative reasons that drew attention to it during the late 1990s. In this respect, the Colombian government's military effort against the FARC has also turned into a sort of consoling narrative for US recent foreign policy. When looking at the balance sheet of the 'Global War on Terrorism', after a decade of intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, Colombia appears to show how, with little taxpayers' money and no need for 'boots on the ground', Washington was able to advance its policy goals by assisting a foreign government in dealing with its own security problems with the right tools and techniques. If anything, this thesis is a call for prudence before attempting to use the Colombian case as a model for so called 'small footprint' intervention, by avoiding generalisations and exploring the case study within its unique historical and political context.

If we follow philosopher Benedetto Croce, who said that 'all history is contemporary history', given that it is written from the point of view of our contemporary preoccupations,⁷ this thesis might also come as a necessary contribution to knowledge as it provides a much needed study of the understudied Colombian counter-insurgency, now that the conflict seems to be moving into a different phase. During the course of the research, in November 2012, a

⁶ Douglas Porch 'Writing History in the "End of History" Era—Reflections on Historians and the GWOT', *The Journal of Military History* Volume 70, Number 4 (2006), pp.-1078-1079.

⁷ Vernon Bogdanor, 'I believe in yesterday', *New Statesman*, 17 December 2009. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/2009/12/contemporary-history-public> (Accessed 31 October 2015).

third round of peace negotiations with the FARC began, but this time under the government's ascendancy. The negotiations are aimed at finding a definite closure to the conflict and convince the FARC to enter the political process and renounce its armed struggle. There are high expectations of the signature of a peace agreement sooner rather than later, even before the end of 2016.⁸ If this happens, this research could have potential for expansion for two related reasons. First, because as part of the pre-agreements signed between the government and the FARC in the past two years, it has been established that Transitional Justice mechanisms including a Truth Commission will be set up to support the reconstruction of historical memory.⁹ Given the role of the Colmil as a main actor in the conflict it will be required to stimulate the study of its history, and this is a task in which this research can be valuable. The second reason, is that if the will to advance Transitional Justice mechanisms in the country does flourish, this might translate into an extensive declassification of national security and military archives. Such an event could lead not only to a revision of some of the points made in this thesis, but, most importantly it could allow the expanded exploration of the most turbulent years of the conflict after the 1970s, something that could not be fully addressed here due to the limited access to primary sources of those years. The history of the Colmil, in short, is still a work in progress.

⁸ 'Colombia Special Report: The road to peace. This time is different', *The Economist*, 31 October 2015. Available at: <<http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21676952-peace-process-could-become-example-world-time-different>> (Accessed 31 October 2015).

⁹ International Crisis Group, *Transitional Justice and Colombia's peace talks*, Latin America Special Report No. 49, 29 August 2013. Available at: <[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/latin-america/colombia/049-transitional-justice-and-colombia-s-peace-talks.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/latin-america/colombia/049-transitional-justice-and-colombia-s-peace-talks.pdf)> (Accessed 31 October 2015).

APPENDICES

Figure 4: Estimated Number and Size of Bandit Gangs active in the Coffee-growing departments in 1962

Department	Number of bandit gangs	Total Bandits	Average Bandits per gang	Number of gangs with more than 50 bandits.
Caldas	33 (37%)	513 (29%)	15	1
Valle	30 (33%)	512 (29%)	17	1
Tolima	27 (30%)	756 (42%)	28	7
Total	90 (100%)	1,781 (100%)	20	9

Source: Copied from Sanchez and Meertens, *Bandits*, p.68. Original data found in Colombian National Police statistical handbook of 1965.

Figure 5 : Average structure of the Colombian Army

Year	Divisions	Brigades	COIN Units	Total Personnel	Conscripts
1952 *	0	6	0	25,000	n.d
1967	0	8	n.d (Company Level)	50,000	n.d
1970	0	8	n.d	50,000	n.d
1982	0	10	1 Ranger bn	57,000	28,500
1991	4	15	2 bde (each with 9bn)	115,000	38,000
2002	5	17	3 Mobile bde (each with 4 COIN bn) 3 CN bn	136,000	63,800
2014	9 (1 air assault)	24	3 Mobile bde (each: 4 COIN bn); 1 Rapid Reaction Force (1 SF bde 3 mobile bde); 1 CN bde (3 bn)	235,000	63,800 +/-

Source: IISS Military Balance

*: Source: Russell Ramsey, *Guerrilleros y Soldados*, 1981.

n.d: No details

bde: Brigade

bn: Battalion

COIN: Counter-insurgency, CN: Counter-narcotics

Figure 6: Progression of Illegal Armed Groups in Colombia since 1948

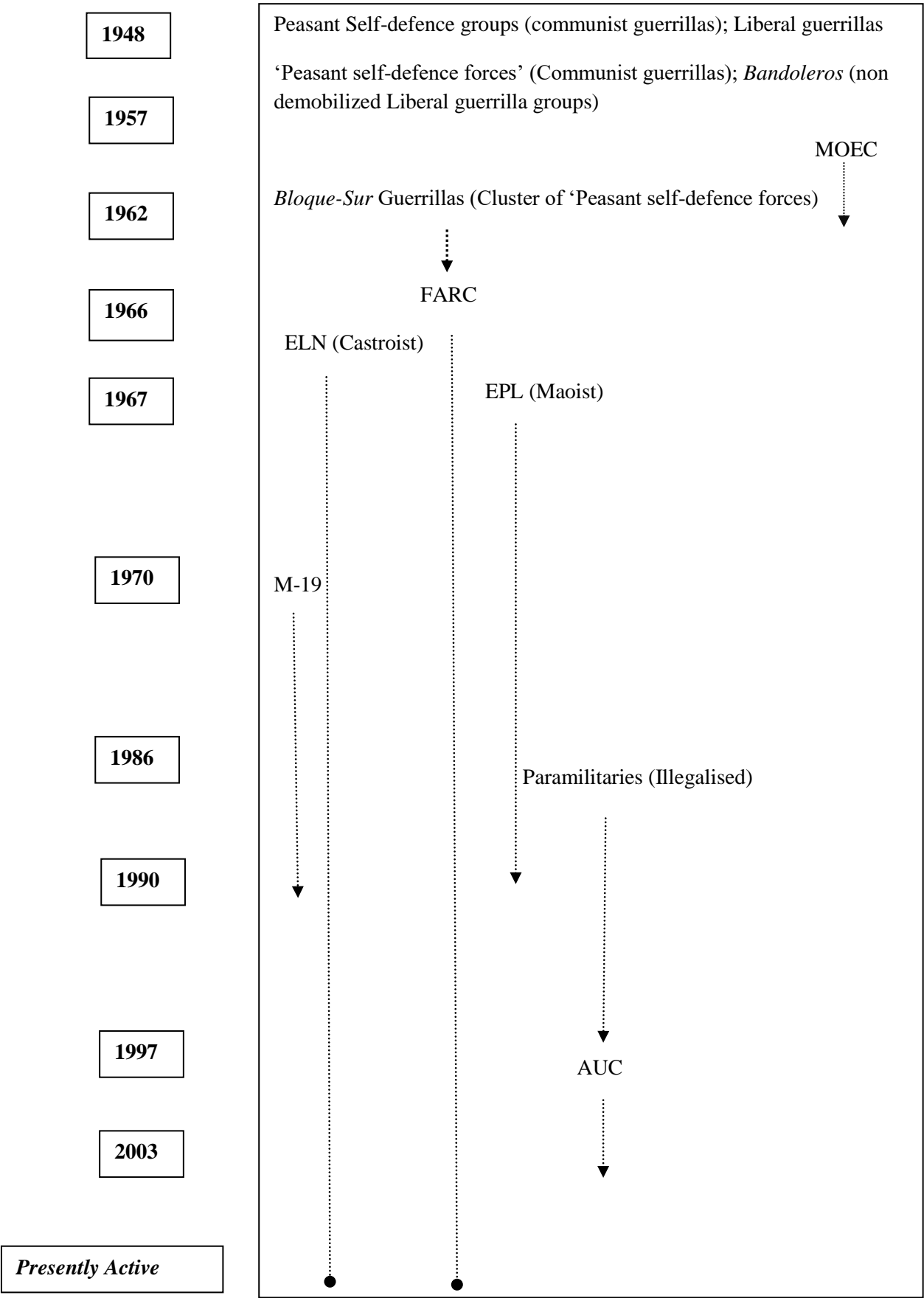
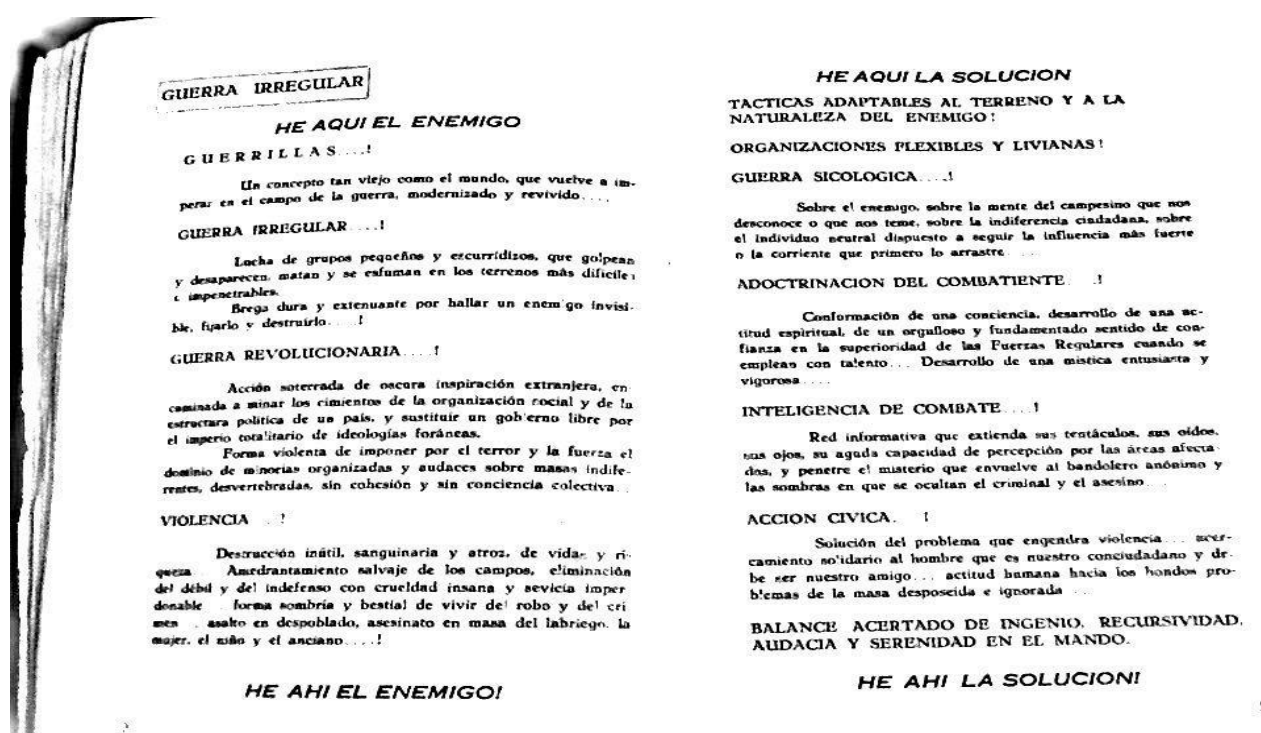


Figure 7: Colombian Army Doctrinal Manifesto 1962

IRREGULAR WAR	BEHOLD THE SOLUTION
<p align="center">BEHOLD THE ENEMY</p> <p>GUERRILLAS...! A concept as old as the world, modernised and revived it prevails again in warfare.... IRREGULAR WAR....! Struggle of small and elusive groups that hit and run, kill, and, vanish in impenetrable terrain. Hard labour is to find an invisible enemy, locate him and destroy him....!</p> <p>REVOLUTIONARY WAR....! Hidden action of dark foreign inspiration to undermine the basis of social organization and the political structure of a country, substitute a free government by totalitarian rule of foreign ideologies. Violent form of imposing through terror and force rule by organized and audacious minorities over an indifferent and invertebrate mass without collective conscience.</p> <p>VIOLENCE....! Useless, bloody and atrocious destruction of life and wealth. Savage intimidation of the countryside, elimination of the weak and vulnerable with sick cruelty and unforgivable brutality...dark and beastly form of life out of crime...assault and mass murder of workers, women, children and elders....!</p>	<p>ADAPTABLE TACTICS TO THE TERRAIN AND THE NATURE OF THE ENEMY! FLEXIBLE AND LIGHT ORGANIZATIONS! PSYCHOLOGICAL WAR....! On the enemy, on the mind of the peasant that does not recognise us or fear us, over citizen indifference, over the neutral individual sitting on the fence.</p> <p>ADOCTRINATION OF COMBATANTS....! Building of a conscience, develop and spiritual attitude, of a proud and solid sense of superiority of Regular Forces when employed with genius...Development of an enthusiastic and vigorous mystique.</p> <p>COMBAT INTELLIGENCE....! Informative networks extending their tentacles, their ears, and their acute capacity of perception thought the affected areas; penetrates the mystery that surrounds the anonymous bandit and the shadows in which the criminals and murderers hide.</p>
<p>BEHOLD THE ENEMY!</p>	<p>CIVIC ACTION....! Solution to the problem that engenders violence...solidary approach to the man who is our co-citizen and has to be our friend...humane attitude towards the deep problems of a disposed and ignorant mass. CORRECT BALANCE OF GENIUS, RESOURCEFULNESS. AUDACITY AND SERENITY IN COMMAND.</p> <p>BEHOLD THE SOLUTION!</p>



Source: N.a, 'Guerra irregular. El enemigo, la solución,' *Revista de Infanteria* Vo.2 No.4 (1962), pp.10-11.

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